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Steering to the Edge of Trust

Essay by Kevin Werbach, May 13, 2008 in response to Tacit Governance

David Weinberger's essay demonstrates that what we do know, but don't formalize, can actually help us. His analysis is characteristically deep and provocative. However, the parts he leaves out demand a closer look. The real action lies at the interface between tacit and explicit governance mechanisms for cyberspace.

That hidden norms can organize online behavior should not surprise us. As David points out, "governance" derives from the Greek kubernetes, or steering. The prefix "cyber" shares the same root. Norbert Wiener and his colleagues in the mid-20th century coined the term "cybernetics" to describe the implicit control mechanisms — the tacit governance — that produce order without external direction. In other words, the rule of norms is inherent in the very definition of cyberspace.

Yet there is more to the story than that. Norms and rules need each other. That is, after all, why the Founding Fathers of America produced the Federalist Papers. Their aim was to show how the norm of liberty and the explicit rules of the Constitution would serve each other.

The same is true in cyberspace. Online interactions are necessarily mediated by digital communications systems. David emphasizes the role of software, which is extensible in ways no prior media allowed. Yet even software, plastic in its functionality, must at times be rigid in its interfaces. Otherwise, the small pieces that make up the Internet would never be joined, however loosely. Anyone can edit the open source code of the Firefox browser, but if the resulting application can't interpret the very explicit rules of HTML markup, users won't see the Web.

Moreover, a great deal of cyberspace involves not software, but infrastructure. And that infrastructure is chock full of rules. The days when researchers built the Internet as a communal activity are long gone. Backbone networks and domain name registries link together through written contracts: explicit governance through and through. The same goes for technical standards. As norm-driven as the Internet Engineering Task Force may be, its function is to systematically surface and formalize those norms into rules. There are right and wrong ways to write the technical documents known as RFCs, to populate the header fields of an Internet protocol data packet, and to advertise routes across interconnected networks. And those infrastructure rules matter. Bad route advertisements recently took YouTube off the Internet worldwide, after Pakistan attempted to block it locally.

The Internet's rules rule because the old norm-based approaches no longer serve the huge and diverse Internet community. Gone are the days when @Home, a cable broadband service with no subscribers but good relationships, was allocated as much address space as all of China. Moreover, the norms of those building networks and those using them are increasingly mis-aligned. Many of the staunchest defenders of tacit governance in cyberspace are the loudest advocates of explicit non-discrimination rules governing how network operators deliver their packets. Network neutrality is, at bottom, an effort to surface a norm and make it into a rule. It may well be a worthwhile endeavor. Either way, it shows the danger of an uncritical preference for tacit over explicit governance.

Where, then, is the dividing line between norms and rules? It is the edge of trust. If I can trust my compatriots, I need no formal rules to rein them in. Trust is strongest when dealing with those we know or share values with. Small groups, like the engineers who built the original Internet or the inner circle of top-tier Wikipedia editors, are more likely to trust each other. The larger the sphere of governance, the more likely interests will diverge, and the less likely that norms will suffice.

Yet bigger is not always worse. Larger and more heterogeneous communities are the best hedge against the tyranny of the majority. As James Madison, an earlier Publius, explained in the Federalist No. 10, those who represent the interests of many are less likely to be emissaries of the special interests of a few.

The cyber-solution to this governance dilemma is to fight the constraint that produces all the tensions: scarcity. Abundance trumps governance. There is no need to worry about resource allocation when there are more than enough resources to go around. And those who find their norms ill-served can choose a more suitable environment, because the costs of forming new groups and institutions are so low.

The good news is that cyberspace – if we let it – can be the greatest engine of abundance the world has ever known. From the billions of search clicks that Google pairs with targeted text ads to the millions of WiFi devices using shared wireless spectrum to the hundreds of thousands of books along Amazon.com's long tail, abundance is the driving force of the Internet economy. It should be an abiding goal of Internet governance as well. Furthering the historical analogy, it was territorial expansion, to the Western edge of the continent and beyond, that channeled and checked the tensions of the nascent American constitutional republic.

If cyberspace is to be well-governed, therefore, it must grow. We must resist the temptation to look back nostalgically to the frontier homesteading days, when norms dominated because so many of them were shared. Let us, as David urges, embrace the Internet's wondrous chaos. At the same time, though, let us sing the praises of its well-designed rules. The shared enemy is not structure, but exclusivity and other barriers to choice and connectivity.

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