

# I Still Think We Had it (Almost) Right: Community Networking, the Forgotten Gene of a New Better Internet

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# I Still Think We Had it (Almost) Right: Community Networking, the Forgotten Gene of a New Better Internet



## Abstract

*This personal and non-exhaustive account of an exciting (and Quixotic?) time in the history of computing, before the Internet was ubiquitous and controlled by corporations, describes The Community Networking Movement. It was a brief but exciting moment for community and civic action. Community networks, along with public libraries other civic innovations, were motivated by civic purpose. They were locally controlled sites on the Internet that typically free services including training and hardware donations, as well as e-mail (years before Google and others got involved) web space, and community forums. This was all done without exhaustive surveillance and the gathering and sales of private information. The paper discusses the movement in general, as well as what went wrong, what if the movement had succeeded, and whether it may be possible to regain some of the much-needed civic purpose in the future. In addition to the obvious case of being massively outspent and ignored, the organizers had shortcomings of their own, including underestimating the threat, inadequate institutional ties, and inattention to the potential of scale. If we had succeeded the current online environment may have been less-commodified and more diverse and empowered than the one we have now. But we will never know. Today we see a world beset with problems that are colossal, quickly worsening, and are threatening our planet and our species. Building robust and resilient civic intelligence planet should be a top priority. Sadly, it is not. It may be the case in fact that our collective ability to address our problems may be eroding. Community networks with civic purpose, seem like better candidates for dealing with global—as well as local—issues, than today’s corporately controlled environment.*

*Keywords: Community Networks; Internet History; Civic Intelligence*

## **Introduction**

Motivated by the Free-Nets, Santa Monica PEN, Berkeley Community Memory, and the Big Sky Telegraph system in Montana (Agre and Schuler 1997), the Seattle chapter of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR)—of which I was an active member—launched the Seattle Community Network (SCN) in 1994. SCN provided training, computer donations, free web pages and free email—a full decade before Gmail arrived on the scene. But we did not sell ads or surveil our users. And our volunteer pool of over 100 volunteers could not have imagined that they would be competing in the future against gigantic corporations with untold billions at their disposal.

Community networks were locally run projects that were launched before access to the Internet was granted to everybody. In my 1996 book, *New Community Networks*, I described community networks as following:

Before computers took center stage, the term "community network" was a sociological concept that described the pattern of communications and relationships in a community. This was the web of community that described how news traveled and how social problems were addressed in the community. New computer-based "community networks" are a recent innovation that are intended to help revitalize, strengthen, and expand existing people-based community networks much in the same way that previous civic innovations have helped communities historically.

In one of the appendixes I included the contact information on 78 community networks in the United States and 33 in other countries, while other researchers at the time had recorded nearly 300 existing projects and nearly 200 more under development (Doctor & Ankem, 1995) [note 1].

The community network movement was a worldwide grassroots movement that was not launched in one single place, nor by a single person or company. And although each local effort had its unique profile in terms of goals, strategies, organization, community partners, etc., several features that characterized the vast majority of the efforts are notable:

- They were under local control.
- They were not-for-profit and / or were part of civil society (public libraries were often partners)
- They were mostly volunteer driven.
- They were loosely federated, meaning that many of the community networks had at least one representative who communicated and collaborated with representatives of other community networks.
- They were democratic, specifically in the cultural sense of wanting a thriving public sphere.

- They were likely to be purposeful, idealistic, and pluralistic. SCN, for example, developed a set of principles that included five commitments: Commitment to Access, Commitment to Service, Commitment to Democracy, Commitment to the World Community, and Commitment to the Future (see appendix or <http://www.scn.org/ip/commnet/principles.html>)
- They were diverse. Looking back at them, the community network movement as a whole, forms an almost perfect research project since the individual community networks have so much in common in terms of dispositions and aspirations but varied so much in terms of funding, partners, methods, communities served, specific goals, and the broad environment they operated within.
- They were experimental—although I do not think we thought in those terms. For what it is worth, we were making it up as we went along.

### **Sour Grapes or Food for Thought?**

Let me be the first to complain that this work has not been properly acknowledged in the history of the Internet. And, yes, as a matter of fact, that does piss me off. Unfortunately, as everybody knows, non-victors do not write history.

But—of course—I should take a more mature approach, a wiser and more productive path, moving beyond petty grievances into areas of substance—if, indeed, I am capable of that.

Cyberspace, as everybody knows, is now ruled by a handful of gigantic companies. What takes place on their platforms is subservient on some level to their bottom line. When corporations—or even, in the most pathological case, a single person—can effectively own the platform that hundreds of people use daily, democracy is put at risk. Twitter, of course, provides the most recent, as well as the most blatant example of this, where Elon Musk, is essentially recreating the platform in his own image. All the while extolling "free speech" he has banned links to other social media sites and thrown journalists off the platform for infractions known only to himself. But some of his own tweets suggest an even darker future: telling people, for example, that "The woke mind virus is either defeated or nothing else matters" is more-or-less a call for the elimination of certain thoughts, a scary vision whose consequences I leave to your imagination.

When the sole purpose is making the largest profit possible, the platforms have no problems helping autocrats marginalize and surveil their critics and to cultivate loyal and more subservient allies more effectively. Facebook, for example, made money hand over fist encouraging far right, insurrectionary hate groups: "Their content was reaching 140 million US users per month—75% of whom had never followed any of the alt-right / extremist pages. They were seeing the content because Facebook's content-recommendation system had pushed it into their news feeds." (Hao 2021). Despots in Brazil, Philippines, and around the world are using social media to drown out criticism while polishing up their own images, using troll farms and

bots. (Pomerantsev, 2019) Social media is routinely weaponized as disinformation aimed at disrupting competitors and stirring up distrust and hatred within other countries.

While the behavior of the tech giants calls for deep scrutiny, there has been little effort to rein them in or challenge them to be better citizens. We should have known better—the history of media (in the US at least) is the history of innovation becoming subservient to corporations (McChesney, 2016). They grew so fast and to such dizzying heights of power and wealth that today the idea of any regulation is anathema; tech is simply off limits. Reining them in through, for example, existing (though disused and mostly forgotten) antitrust rules in the US has been more-or-less ignored.

But focusing on the egregious behavior of Big Tech obscures other serious problems. One of the most unfortunate side-effects of ceding all the power to corporate interests is that civic innovation did not receive the attention that it deserved, especially given the fact the early internet was undergoing immense transformation. It also denied the possibility of actual civic needs driving the evolution of responsive, supportive civic and community systems. And although community networks arguably should have been more concerned about money and their bottom line, that was not their primary motivation.

This article cannot do justice to the immensity of the challenges that unregulated big tech presents. We are focusing here on what could have been done, what should have been done, and what actually was done. But, ideally, we move beyond that and focus some attention on what actually could still be done right now.

## **What Went Wrong?**

On many levels, the community networking movement was quite robust. A very loosely coordinated group of community networks, from Vancouver, Halifax, Tallahassee to Milan, St. Petersburg, and Kyiv(!) existed at that time, making a total of over 110 (<http://www.scn.org/ncn/>) and that was surely incomplete. The groups were all loosely bound around the idea of providing access for free or deeply discounted—not surveilled or monetized—access to the Internet and to other people, and, to varying degrees, to community empowerment and democracy on the Internet. Quite a bit of organizing work going on at that time. The CTC-network, founded by Antonia Stone, was very active, with hundreds of affiliate Community Technology Centers in the US. Their newsletter, the Community Technology Center Review, edited by Peter Miller, helped demonstrate the commonality, intentions, and richness of the broader community. There were several Ties that Bind conferences sponsored by Apple and international conferences in Milan, Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Buenos Aires. There was a well-organized group in Canada. And work with CPSR and the Directions and Implications of Advanced Computing (DIAC) conferences. The public library community was often involved as were forward-looking academics from diverse disciplines around the world. But most of the work disappeared from view, if not from existence altogether. How in just a few years was all of this lost?

There is plenty of blame to go around! We can point fingers both inward and outward, while ceding that the outside forces were stronger, more experienced, far richer, and more plentiful than ours. The advent of community networks unfortunately landed right during a high-water mark of individualism, the cock-eyed view that people are not deeply social creatures, and that success could be achieved by one's self alone. Tech practitioners were drawn to this view and although all the foundational work on the Internet was paid for by US taxpayers, many had their attention focused on exclusively on wealth accumulation and giving back may have been the last thing on their minds. But individualism as being inherently anti-government, was a stalking horse for capitalism, as in the old days of Robber Baronism, when corporations could more or less do anything they wanted to do. (I think I know what you are thinking.)

But, to be candid, it would have been easier for us to change our habits (though not easily!) then for the corporations and other powerful institutions to change theirs. Still, even, with a wholesale change in strategies and amount of effort, the community network likely still would end up as minor players in the tsunami of corporate investment. It should also be acknowledged that some of the conventional wisdom about the failings of community networks might not be all wrong and that I probably deserve my own little share of the blame too.

### **Trivializing Our Mission**

There were numerous danger signs in the zeitgeist even when the movement was seemingly quite strong. I cataloged the ones I perceived in a short piece with the provocative title "How to Kill Community Networks" (Schuler, 1996) to nudge people onto what I considered to be the better path forward, I discussed three "counterproductive attitudes:"

"Community networks may continue their rise in importance, or they may fade into obscurity. Community networks will not be killed by a stroke of the pen, a judge's degree, or a rejected funding proposal. If they wither away, it will likely be for reasons that we see today; attitudes that can sometimes be found within today's community network movement. These counterproductive attitudes include:

- Community networks are utilities, like electricity or gas.
- The lack of money is the biggest obstacle to their success.
- Community network projects are technological projects.

This last attitude has three consequences: Don't involve the community; have "professionals" guide the project; and don't think politically."

Each of the three points was arguing against visions that were too narrow. For example, if providing access to the internet was the only goal every community network would have been out of business virtually overnight. (And, as far as access to the internet goes, community groups were vacating the home we provided, to get develop their own web sites—so in fact we had been to some degree, at least implicitly thinking narrowly—and did not respond by offering modern enough wrappers and services. And, coincidentally, a new Seattle Community Network that does focus on technology, now exists. They focus on providing internet services but with deep community involvement and to an audience that is generally been neglected by business—

people who have fewer dollars to vote with.) By the way, the Seattle Community Network (<http://www.scn.org>) is still in business, barely, but still running. I would like to think that with the right people and the right effort it could revive. I've been likened to being a dog with a bone on several occasions.

Mario Morino, an early supporter of community networks suggested, (Rheingold 2000) that purposeless was the fatal flaw: "Community networking has been a movement in search of a cause and this has been its curse." In his view, "community networking never clearly articulated its purpose."

While I suggested above (and in 1996) that some community networks were seeing their mission too narrowly, there were plenty of inspirational goals on the table. From the 1994 Ties that Bind conference, goals included the "development of civil society in a post-apartheid South Africa", "civic networking at the local community level", "economic revitalization," "environmental consensus building and education", "providing open forums where free speech is encouraged", and "bridging the gap that currently exists between people" to name just a few (Schuler, 1996b).

While it is true that, unlike big tech, the community networks did not agree on a single "purpose." Morino also stated that the potential of the network is helping "people connect with one another, and more importantly, to help them toward an outcome." It is unclear to me whether he means that all community networks should agree on a single purpose, or that individual community networks should help all the groups using the community network achieve an outcome. If he meant the former, then I would say that it is impossible. If he meant the latter, I would say that we lacked the resources and the necessary skills to do the whole job.

But that is not to say that we did not try. With SCN we worked with groups who were working towards outcomes. The outcome that we hoped to achieve was actually a meta-outcome: positive outcomes from all of our community members. Ironically, critique aside, many of the community networks were more like today's commercial social networks, that aside from being non-profitmaking, were not devoted to a single purpose—and these have not entirely disappeared from the scene. And it was this diversity and the interconnectedness that I tried to capture in the "community core values" that I presented in *New Community Networks*:

conviviality and culture, education, governance, health and well-being, economic equity, opportunity, and sustainability, and information and communication.

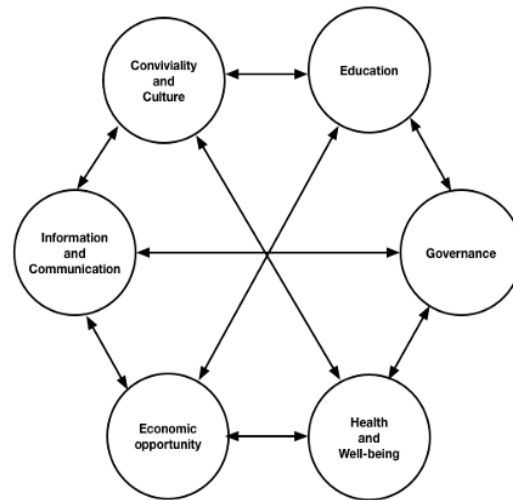


Figure 1. Community Core Values

### **Assuming that Government Was Unsuitable**

The popular perspective, from all over the political spectrum of the time, seemed to be that government was inherently bad (and, granted, it often is). This was clearly also part of the hesitation behind the community network community's inability to successfully engage government in supporting community networks. The view that if a community-oriented platform / infrastructure was not established or supported by the government, then the task would fall to big corporate interests, was not a common one.

The then seemingly radical idea of community-owned and operated digital ICT hubs yielded virtually overnight the entire burgeoning field of cyberspace to commercial concerns, hardly a radical, or even progressive, outcome. To me this is what government in the ideal sense is intended for; to help ensure that necessary actions take place for the general well-being that would not take place if left for other actors.

At the same time there actually was a substantial gap between the overall competence and knowledge of government in relation to tech as compared to the tech community. (And, by the way, a gap that continues to exist, given the vast difference in pay between government and corporate tech jobs.) There was also a strong government education role that could be seen in Seattle that was provided by the community networking community, where SCN volunteers actually went to city hall and presented elementary internet operations to city officials.

### **Underestimating the Threats**

And at the same time that we under appreciated the prospect of government support, our critique of tech—specifically that of a future totally dominated by corporations—was generally not part of our overall narrative. It is possible that this critique would have helped us better make our case to the outside world—but also to ourselves.



Nor, of course, were we aware of the magnitude of the threat we faced. I was shocked—although, in retrospect, should not have been, that Bill Clinton's special commission on the National Information Infrastructure (NII) was composed almost entirely corporate executives although, belatedly, one school teacher was added to quell the critics. [Sounds like Google's ill-fated AI Ethics Council, backed with ringers, that lasted less than one week under the fire of criticism. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/apr/04/google-ai-ethics-council-backlash>]

There were also memes going around (yes! Even before the word meme became a meme) that suggested that the Internet had near-magical qualities. This naive faith can be expressed quite well by the (in)famous quote that asserted that the Internet "routed around censorship." If the Internet was immune to anything people did in relation to it, then naturally enough, it did not need any regulation or, on the other hand, nor would there be any for need subsidies or other incentives for alternatives such as community networks.

### **Failing to Establish Adequate Social and Organizational Ties**

The main point here is to highlight the importance of these ties—not to denigrate any of the efforts that were made along these lines. If we had made stronger ties in our communities, we might have had broader and more sustained support for our efforts. If we had made stronger ties among our own community network of community networks, we might have had more resilience and power to influence policymakers. While a disconnected (seemingly autonomous) example of a community network, particularly a successful one, could serve as a useful model or proof of concept, a network of networks, particularly one that successfully leveraged the network benefits, would be more useful to the movement. And I suspect we did not adequately give mutual aid to other community networks. We did not think hard enough about leveraging the broader network of community networks and our resources, as we were, not surprisingly, primarily concerned with our local community efforts.

The Seattle Public Library was the first and most useful partner in SCN's burgeoning effort. Academia would have also made an excellent partner but when we approached the University of Washington, it was explained to us that the whole point of the Internet was communicating with people far away.

### **Building on Weak Business Models**

Howard Rheingold in his revised *The Virtual Community* (2000) stated that "it's worth noting that a whole class of community networks foundered on a weak business model (those that supported themselves by being Internet service providers)." Since that did not match my view of the situation, I sent this hypothesis (admittedly 20+ years after Howard posited it) out to a list of people that included many of the people who were involved in the original community network movement. Only one of those efforts was using the service provider model (the Northern New York Library Network which was sold in the 1990s whose proceeds are still used for community projects) although some then and now had some fees associated. One of the newer systems, for example, that provides for rural South African communities, charges about \$1.50 USD for a month of service, approximately 50 times less than the commercial providers. Some of the

community networks that were registered as non-profits apparently faced the ire of the IRS if they did charge for services. (It is my understanding that charging for expenses is fine within the 501.c.3 designation, however.) While it seems that in practice this "whole class" seems to be quite small in number, the question of weak business models is worth considering. In my book (1996) I analyzed a variety of business models, in which I learned, not surprisingly, that none of them were perfect for our purposes. But some were less perfect than others. The ones that were closer to perfect, again not surprisingly, were ones that relied on some degree of public funding, basically the public library model. Rheingold goes on to say that partnering with corporations or with universities, both of whom would provide some basic subsidies, was the approach to take, with the implication that all of the community networks should have done that. However, these strong partnerships were not trivially struck. As mentioned above, our contacts with the University of Washington were markedly non-promising. Finally, it should be acknowledged that the "business model" was inadequate for the broad goals, and indeed I, for one, spent little time thinking about a "business model" at all, probably because, first and foremost, I did not regard community networks as businesses but as valuable community resources.

### **Undervaluing of Scale and Architecture**

One argument that I have not heard applied directly in relation to community networks, but pertinent nevertheless, is the assumption, sometimes explicit, that things digital must be accomplished "at scale." This has that technical ring of authenticity and is generally invoked with the assurance that this must be obvious to anybody who had any sense at all. Here, "at scale", means coming up with something that can be accomplished with software and has no limits to the size of users it can accommodate. The argument is probably based on the assumption of efficiency or cost. A community network approach should not ignore those concerns—having a full-time administrator for every tiny huddle of users makes no sense—but the idea that all the control and policy should be in the hands of a small number of opaque and unresponsive authorities is also not palatable.

The architecture of a very large social media system (like Facebook) is going to be, more or less, hierarchical while a federated system with local more-or-less autonomous nodes (e.g. a Seattle Community Network, a Milano Civic Network, etc.) is not hierarchical. Presumably there would be an appropriate balance of control and lack of control by and of, the users that is based on local characteristics. But other architectural approaches are possible. Fiorella de Cindio suggests that the multitenancy technology which is now provided by many software platforms (such as Decidim, an open-source platform for a broad offering of democratic processes) allows administrators to deploy as many portals as are necessary, for the different institutional levels of local government. They could also allow each citizen to move from one level to the other with the same registration account, i.e., with the same identity.

A federated arrangement is possible, as demonstrated with the Mastodon approach. That, ideally, would help promote the sharing of ideas among the federates, each governed via its own covenant (Gehl & Zulli, 2022) and would lend support to others when it was needed. And would come together as a single unit when necessary. This, in itself, is not easy. And to a large degree the community networks did not privilege this idea or else tried it but did not succeed.

## **Blame Assignments**

Summing up, I would place the major blame, first on the overall one-sidedness of the battle; the odds were entirely with the corporate forces. As for the secondary blame, I would not place it solely on the community networks efforts. The general lack of social imagination and the concomitant privileging of economic thinking pose massive hurdles to any effort that seeks alternatives and, arguably with a big, more social, imagination and a bit less economic thinking, the community network movement would have gained a foothold in much the same way that the public library system ultimately did.

## **But What if We Had Succeeded?**

If thanks to a plethora of strange quirks and a miraculous against-all-odds chain of events, the movement had been successful, what might our social media landscape look like now? And, more to the point, what influence might it have had? Presumably, it would not have brought down all the forces of ignorance. But might an alternative history look like? How would local control and global reach play out? We may have ended up with new civic resources that were more resilient to attacks, more responsive to community needs, more community focused, and had a stronger civic intelligence.

The idea of being more resilient, of course, is speculation, but perhaps the evidence suggests that it is at least plausible. How, for example, would a federated collective of community networks respond to the weaponized fake information attacks on the 2016 election? The federated nature might ensure that a "one size fits all" attack would not succeed everywhere. The distributed nature of the federation through intentionality of design introduces delays in data propagation. Also, the various covenants that governed the various community networks in the federation might prepare the users better to resist outlandish and manufactured information. Moreover, the profit motive that was presumably behind Facebook's broad support for the propaganda (Hao, 2021), would not be there. But concerted attacks by well-resourced adversaries are hard to fend off, and democratic enterprises where access to the loud speakers is a virtue, might have responded with too little and too late. But, like the original Internet, nodes could fail while the entire assembly would survive virtually intact.

In addition to the possibility of being better equipped to rebuff attacks from outside, one potential advantage of the distributed, community-owned community networking federation is the ability to evolve new improved variants based on community needs and opportunities that were not noticed until the systems were used. This potentially vast capability is simply not possible with the current system of corporate ownership. To help us sense the potential of this approach we take as an example, one of the more long-lived community networks, the Milan Civic Network, and loosely trace the co-evolution of a community network as it focused on its mission within a technological / social environment.

The picture of the RCM ecosystem below represents several related initiatives:

The original Milan Community Network (RCM) started in September 1994;

The Civic Informatics Laboratory (LIC) at Computer Science Department of the Università Statale di Milano started in May 1994 to mutually leverage the network and the CS department;

The RCM Foundation (MIT 2003 book) established in Dec. 1998 to manage RCM and other related initiatives, and to support the LIC by signing and managing contracts with public and private companies;

partecipaMi (Participate), the updated version of RCM, was created to help support discussions between citizens of Milan and their local representative on issues relevant to city life (general topics such as cinema, cooking, parenting, etc are not allowed unless they pertain to civic issues). <https://www.partecipami.it/content/view/28>; and

openDCN, the software platform for online participation and deliberation modalities developed as a common effort by the LIC and RCM Foundation (and hosts partecipaMi).



Figure 2. The Milan Community Network: Evolution and Institutional Support

This list, necessarily incomplete, just begins to link all of the elements that helped support local democracy and civic work in Milan. In the hypothetical world we are examining here, each town or city—community—would have undergone such an incremental, build-as-you-know, approach to supporting local community (which, of course, connects ultimately to national governments and to others outside the home country).

Another value, undeveloped under the corporate, for-profit social media environment, is the focus on where people live. This connection to place and the idiosyncratic elements that places manifest is under-appreciated in the corporate approach. This has indirect disadvantages, some of which may not show their damaging effects right away. These include a loss of trust, a lack of knowledge of connections between communities, a disconnect between people and local and other governmental entities, isolation, and a degraded ability to advocate for local community.

In an interview with Eli Pariser (2022) from New\_Public, US House member Ro Kanna said this about our current social media: "we under appreciated people's attachment to place. We under appreciated the necessity of community. I think now we are suffering the consequence of that with a lot of communities destroyed—many of them now feeling they do not have a place in a modern economy, and do not have a sense of identity." And as communities that mostly were defined by place, community networks were prioritizing place as well as the necessity of community.

The bottom line, generally left unsaid, is that the ways in which our vast information and communication infrastructure functions should help human beings do what is right for themselves, other beings, and the planet. This is basically what united the entire community networking community—whether it was explicitly acknowledged or not. This is an aspect of what I and others call civic intelligence, the ability of individuals and, more importantly, groups of people, to address significant shared challenges effectively and equitably.

The idea of building robust and resilient civic intelligence among humans on the planet should be a top priority. Humankind is faced with enormous challenges that in theory we could think about collectively and develop responses to that end. In theory we could do that well or we could do it poorly. At any rate, it is everybody's business. Even to the degree that certain individuals or computers take charge, the rest of us will still at least assume the lesser roles of supporting good ideas and resisting bad ones. Networked digital communication can help with this goal—and, indeed, it would be folly to ignore this potential. But why is it resisted? For one thing, the financial rewards are not as lucrative. Also, the goals are fuzzier and even if they were clearer, attaining them is still uncertain. Finally, along those lines, nobody has the answer, and, interestingly enough, big tech acolytes, generally the chief purveyors of tech solutionism, even seem to shy away from stating that they know the answer.

But not knowing the answer does not mean that we do not have good ideas how to move forward. One promising effort is currently underway by a group called New\_Public. One piece of their efforts is to identify "signals" based on a study of existing social media that help promote healthy online spaces. They have identified 14 signals which they organize into four categories: Welcome, Understand, Connect, and Act. Many, if not all of them, seem to support the general thrust of civic intelligence including, especially, the following signals (new\_public):

- Show reliable information
- Build civic competence
- Promote thoughtful conversation
- Build bridges between groups
- Strengthen local ties
- Make power accessible
- Boost community resilience
- Support civic action

These signals can be used to show what might have happened (in this section) and what we might strive for in the next. To answer the question about getting there, one probably needs to have some idea where we would like to be. Looking backwards, it is easier to explain things than it is to forecast or plan for the future. Clearly, in retrospect, the civic networkers would lose to the corporations. The history of the media shows that pattern—in the US and basically everywhere else—quite clearly. What could we learn from the circumstances back then and the circumstances right now?

## **Can We Get There from Here?**

My belief is that we should have worked harder and longer, stayed more focused, petitioned government more, and more effectively, and honed our coordination. (And built more software and built-out more systems.) But—all of that is obviously in the past. We are now where we are. The situation looks grim when all we can see is corporate (while the state the corporations also watch us, but more ominously). But maybe we had to reach this depressing depth, had to know far out of hand they should go, before enough people felt the need to fix things. So, perhaps Elon's artless invasion of Twitter will provide the impetus for building the social media we would have built if we had not been locked into the systems where astronomical wealth for the few would take priority over the benefit of everybody else.

In order to make progress on the design and development of better systems, several things would have to come into play at the same time. There has been some big news in the social media sphere since I started this article. Precipitated by the purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk, an avid consumer of extreme conspiracy stories that couldn't withstand the smallest modicum of common sense, a new sense of awareness in addition to outrage seemed to be in the air. With other mass media, there are some norms that promote integrity (Fox News, of course, is an exception, as are state-run media in authoritarian countries like China and Russia). At any rate, those norms are largely missing from big social media. From the very beginning of the Musk reign at Twitter, the suffocating imprint of his heavy thumb was unavoidable: calling, for example, for the eradication of the "woke mindset" though through what means this enlightenment might come to be is left to the reader. Enter Mastodon, a free open-source social media system. Mastodon is still basically conversational. After all, it is modeled on Twitter. But it could go beyond that and provide shared documents, events, repositories, etc etc. through open source, user initiated innovation, federated with an array of new community apps. The question remains unanswered at this time, of whether the Mastodonian Phenomenon is an interlude (interregnum) or a reprieve (an effective intervention) but the reality is that we will have to swing full force into this opportunity.

It's true that the community networking did not have a single-minded purpose that aligned with all of them. It is also true that we were to a large degree making it up as we went along. The storm was brewing and we had inadequate institutional support; we were unprepared and outgunned. Obviously, the community network movement did not have all the answers. What we had, in retrospect, was some of the some of the answers—including the fact that the

current system of undreamt-of power in the hands of a few billionaires and gargantuan corporations is the wrong answer.

The bottom-line is not that we had it perfect back then. Clearly "freedom of speech" needs to focus more on those who have none before invoking it vociferously for those who have too much. The abuses and weaponizing (and perversion) of the concept of "free speech" have been so egregious and ubiquitous that we are now realizing our unwavering faith in that concept has been naive. For one thing, the vast majority of Earth's inhabitants effectively have no voice and one of the reasons is that the bandwidth is flooded by the precious few (and their squads of bots, both digital and human) who have omnipresent voice. Ironically, it is some of the world's most powerful people who are most likely to make the case that their "free speech" is being threatened. Also, as is the case today, hate speech is amplified to the extent, both in numbers and in length of time, that violence directed against the person being vilified (e.g. Nancy Pelosi, whose husband was ambushed in his home and beaten) is inevitable, it becomes a type of indirect murder by hire. Moreover, there is strong evidence that these hate campaigns, some long-lived (decades, e.g., in the case Hillary Clinton) while others as short as a news-cycle, are well-thought as political strategy. As for the legendary example of speech that is not protected, yelling fire in a theater, this metaphor is well-exercised in practice online: incendiary speech is routine.

When Eli Pariser asked Ro Khanna where he "would draw the line between broadening the focus on public interest in private corporations and actually building public digital infrastructure" Khanna replied that we need both and that "even private companies have a sphere of public obligation and public interest. Right now social media doesn't have that, and that is a glaring weakness because it has such an effect on democracy." And as I have stated in this essay, public digital infrastructure needs to consider the worldwide community network that preceded the corporate and state leviathans.

Today we see a world beset with problems. Not just problems, but problems that are colossal, quickly worsening, and are threatening our planet and our species. At the same time our collective ability to address them may be waning. The problems are seemingly global, but they arise from specific places and their effects are felt in specific places. Community networks, especially with a vision of increasing civic intelligence, are likely to help deal with global as well as local issues.

Any person or group that is working in the community networking sphere, whether it be infrastructure, program development, information provision, policy activism, theorizing, research, or what-have-you, is working on the same project. And each person needs to be actively thinking about and working with other people and groups who are also working in this sphere. We know what happened the last time, including what we got right and where we failed. We were swept away last time. But maybe not so easily this time.

## **Notes**

1. The appendix in (Schuler 1996a) did not include the hundreds of community technology centers. The Doctor and Ankem (1995) directory was later amended to "In February 1996 there

were more than 390 systems either operational or organizing.”  
[http://www.laplaza.org/about\\_lap/archives/cn96/doctor1.html](http://www.laplaza.org/about_lap/archives/cn96/doctor1.html)

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This journey down memory lane was rewarding to me for several reasons including the fact the many of the people involved in these early efforts to civilize and democratize cyberspace ante diluvium are still active in this area. Thanks also to the people who helped address the question regarding the financial models of community networks, i.e. Jack Carroll, Fiorella de Cindio, Sue (Webb) Hall, Nate Hill, Artur Serra Hurtado, Richard Lowenstein, Michel Menou, Peter Miller, David Newman, Shaun Pather, Scott Robinson, and Martin Wolske.

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## Appendix

### Seattle Community Networks Principles

The Seattle Community Network (SCN) is a free public-access computer network for exchanging and accessing information. Beyond that, however, it is a service conceived for community empowerment. Our principles are a series of commitments to help guide the ongoing development and management of the system for both the organizers and participating individuals and organizations.

#### Commitment to Access

Access to the SCN will be free to all

We will provide access to all groups of people particularly those without ready access to information technology.

We will provide access to people with diverse needs. This may include special-purpose interfaces.

We will make the SCN accessible from public places.

#### Commitment to Service

The SCN will offer reliable and responsive service

We will provide information that is timely and useful to the community.

We will provide access to databases and other services.

### **Commitment to Democracy**

The SCN will promote participation in government and public dialogue

The community will be actively involved in the ongoing development of the SCN.

We will place high value in freedom of speech and expression and in the free exchange of ideas.

We will make every effort to ensure privacy of the system users.

We will support democratic use of electronic technology.

### **Commitment to the World Community**

In addition to serving the local community, we will become part of the regional, national and international community

We will build a system that can serve as a model for other communities.

### **Commitment to the Future**

We will continue to evolve and improve the SCN

We will explore the use of innovative applications such as electronic town halls for community governance, or electronic encyclopedias for enhanced access to information.

We will work with information providers and with groups involved in similar projects using other media.

We will solicit feedback on the technology as it is used, and make it as accessible and humane as possible.

