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February 10, 2023

Welcome back to our weekly newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

*Unfinished supports **Project Liberty** in engaging diverse voices to build the critical digital infrastructure that catalyzes change.*

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The future of online governance

It's easy to see the future of the internet in the awe-inspiring (and often controversial) technologies of today: artificial intelligence, virtual reality, web3.

Yet, the future of the web is also being built with the code, protocols, and governance layers that sit beneath the consumer-facing applications.

Governance may not be as flashy as an AI chatbot, but it's possibly far more important for how the internet will work in this decade and beyond.

The online governance models that could define the future of the web and become mainstream are in their infancy today.

This week, we're digging beneath the headlines to explore the renaissance of innovations and experiments taking place at the governance layer of the internet.

What is online governance?

Simply put, online governance is the management of online communities, platforms, and spaces.

It encompasses the editing process for Wikipedia articles, the collective decision-making within a Decentralized Autonomous Organization (DAO), as well as the way users make choices about what data they share with websites (like those pop-ups that prompt you to allow cookies).

The renaissance in online governance

A number of factors are converging to lead to a surge of innovation and experimentation in online governance:

1. **New technologies and protocols**: The blockchain and other newer technologies and protocols are ushering in a suite of new tools (like **smart contracts** and protocols like **DSNP**) that communities can use to organize and govern online.
2. **Digital rights**: There is a growing movement around protecting *digital* rights to privacy and owning and controlling our data online.
3. **Skepticism of big tech**: There's more awareness that the predefined terms of service of big tech platforms like Meta and Twitter are powered by algorithm-based, profit-seeking incentives. The shift from the web2 era controlled by large tech companies to the disaggregated web3 era is an unbundling of major digital spaces into thousands of independent communities.
4. **Intellectual property & ownership**: The rise of powerful technologies like AI are raising bigger questions about ownership of content and the legal implications for digital goods and intellectual property.

All of this leads to more opportunities to define specific ways of organizing, collaborating, and governing online spaces.

We recently connected with **Joshua Tan**, an online governance expert, mathematician, and Executive Director of the **Metagovernance Project**. Tan believes that online governance is becoming more and more important

because online communities are becoming exponentially more powerful in today's society.

He **predicts that by 2032**, DAOs and other digital organizations will organize more assets and production than traditional, legally-constituted corporations in the United States.

Still Early Days

While some experiments in online governance are using existing platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organize users and make decisions, those ad-based social networks weren't originally designed for distributed governance and ownership.

There's a limitation to how far our existing web2 platforms and technology will take us, Tan argues. Building digital-first social movements will require redesigning digital spaces and platforms.

Similarly, as AI becomes more powerful, we might need different legal structures that protect the intellectual property of creators whose art is fed into generative artificial intelligence models.

If the output from the model is "original," but that piece of art or text was created by plagiarizing or stealing content that is someone's protected IP, then there might need to be new approaches to protecting the intellectual property of digital assets. **This podcast** explores this issue from an indigenous rights perspective.

At our conference last year, Tan said that the critiques of these early-stage attempts at online governance are warranted. "What DAOs can do for you today, to be quite honest, is not that much. Instead, think about 10 years later, what DAOs might be able to accomplish: digital contracts that allow you to automate and produce vastly new forms of organization that are more efficient, more just, and more equitable than existing corporations."

Fast Pace of Experimentation

The good news is that experiments and innovations in online governance are happening rapidly. Tan told us, "Of any industry or space, by far the most governance innovation is happening in web3. People are testing and investing in a new set of governance experiments. It is not happening in government, in civic tech, in law, or even in the old virtual worlds, where people weren't incentivized enough to put in the effort to produce innovation."

Examples

Here are some examples of online governance experiments:

- **DAOs**: **DAOs** are experiments in digitally-native, distributed governance where smart-contracts govern how people organize, how decisions are made, and how money is spent. New tools are allowing people to create

[DAO constitutions](#), **[procedures and policies](#)** for distributed online communities, and **[APIs that connect communities to online decision-making tools](#)**.

- **Platform co-ops**: **[Platform co-ops](#)** are cooperatively-owned, democratically governed online businesses and platforms that aren't owned by investors, but by the people who use them and depend on them. One example is **[Stocksy](#)**, a platform for royalty-free stock photography.
- **New voting models like plural voting:** **[Plural voting](#)** (or quadratic voting) reflects the intensity of people's preferences in collective decision-making, and is being used as an alternative to democratic voting.
- **Exit-to-community ownership models**: **[Exit to community models](#)** transition companies from being investor-owned to being owned by the community of workers, customers, and other stakeholders.
- **Data Trusts**: Data trusts are a **[trust where trustees look after the data and data rights of a group of people](#)**. They're gaining popularity in the age of artificial intelligence to protect consumer data.
- **Project Liberty and DSNP**: **[Project Liberty](#)**'s **[Decentralized Social Networking Protocol (DSNP)](#)** that places the ownership of the personalized data that companies exploit to track users on their social media platforms back in the hands of users.

Go deeper

- Explore **[the Metagovernance Project](#)** website for examples of experiments in online governance.
- Read the **[Collective Intelligence Project's whitepaper](#)**. The Collective Intelligence Project is an incubator for new governance models for transformative technology.
- Browse the projects and research that **[RadicalxChange](#)** is doing at the intersection of digital governance, democracy, and human dignity.

If all these experiments in online governance sound a bit abstract, it can be useful to remember that American democracy was (and still is) an experiment in distributed, democratic governance. The renaissance in *online* self-governance today is yet another example in a long history of the evolution of governance, collective decision-making, and human rights. We're excited to keep watching how that history unfolds.

📰 Other notable headlines

🕵️ **Deepfakes**. Deepfake videos, or videos that use artificial intelligence to replace one person with another—often with an intention to deceive or mislead viewers–are becoming more common and less expensive. Last year, according to *The New York Times*, deepfake videos from China were the first known instance of a deepfake video being used as part of a state-aligned propaganda campaign.

🇿🇦 **Unaffordable internet**. Low-income internet users in South Africa are priced out of daytime broadband prices and are forced to use prepaid internet packages that only allow them to go online at night during off-peak hours. Unaffordable internet has the potential to impact educational and health outcomes for students, **according to an article in Rest of the World**.

💬 **AI Chatbots**. Google has announced its ChatGPT competitor, Bard. Similar to OpenAI's ChatGPT, Bard is a "experimental conversational AI service." Competition is heating up, according to an article in **The Verge**, as Microsoft also announced that it will integrate ChatGPT technology into its search engine, Bing.

🏛 **State of the Union**. In Tuesday's State of the Union Address, President Biden took aim at big tech: going after tech platforms' data collection practices, their use of targeting ads at children, and the industry's anti-competitive business practices. In an effort to revive a variety of tech-focused legislative proposals, Biden raised serious concerns about how big tech is experimenting on children for profit, according to **a summary in Gizmodo** of the President's tech-focused State of the Union comments.

Thank you for reading.