

The Circles Project

*An open-source pro-social autonomous network platform
designed and curated by its users*



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The TL;DR

Circles is a practical open-source, pro-social and cooperative platform that allows networks and communities to connect their members more easily and efficiently, but also aims to create cross-connections with other networks to become “a network of networks”. In the Circles ecosystem, each network will host its own data but will allow other networks access to this information and vice versa, giving individual members access to the connections and information of the greater networks.

The challenges at hand

To sum up all the issues with our current global for-profit information-sharing network we call the Internet is quite the challenge. Luckily, readers of this document will most likely be well aware of many central issues through such documentaries as The Social Dilemma, brought to us by the Society for Humane Technology or other videos, blogs, podcasts or publications exploring the same theme. We know that mental health issues such as eating disorders, depression and suicide are on the rise among youth which many argue correlates to time spent online. We know that the algorithms that are designed to capture our attention do so best by polarizing us and giving us the most extreme views of the world available. Not only is polarisation an issue, but if we cannot agree on the basic tenets of reality, collective problem-solving also becomes impossible. If it bleeds, it leads, was the doctrine of the print era, if it enrages, it engages seems to be the dogma of the current digital media era.

This situation is further compounded by the lack of personal privacy and the fact that companies with little to no oversight are allowed to mine and sell our data to anyone they please. Not only does this allow third-party algorithms to know us better than we know ourselves, but this also makes us susceptible to manipulation. This manipulation might be relatively innocent, such as nudging us towards a different product from our regular choice, or more sinister, making us suspicious of our neighbours, pushing us to vote for one extreme political candidate or simply nudging us back to dormant passivity so we don't go out and vote for a more moderate opposition or take other actions to improve our lives and our communities.

In the battle against these secret algorithms and other weapons of manipulation, our side has been on a steady losing streak since Edward Bernays first invented Public Relations in order to plaster over factual reality. We have built little in the way of useful defences against this one-sided onslaught that seeks to “win our hearts and minds”. This is hardly surprising as all the resources and technical development are amassed on the other side, where the money is to be made through power wielded. In this respect, we remain hunter-gatherers facing an enemy powered by guns, machines and whatever legal excuses are required to plunder what little space we can still call our own.

The irony is, of course, that big profit-driven social networks are not designed to support real-life relationships, or deepen connections with ourselves, our friends and our broader communities in any meaningful sense. On the contrary, they seek to weaken such bonds, make us more insecure, more hooked on manufactured dopamine hits, and more disconnected and vulnerable as this will maximize our screen time and consumerist behaviour. In a blatant example of Huxlian Newspeak, social networks are the exact opposite and can evolve into nothing else. The business model will not allow it, as media critics such as Jaron Lanier have demonstrated. To add injury to insult, not only are these commercial so-called social media platforms detrimental to our relationships, they can sever you from these relationships at the drop of a keystroke, underscoring the fact that you indeed own nothing, you are merely a visiting product on their shelf.

So, if current so-called social networks are in fact anti-social, what would the parameters of a pro-social network be? One that deepens our inner development and our external connections, provides more agency and allows you to own your own data and manage your interactions yourself. One that helps you organize your life and your engagements. One that allows you to meet new people and get involved in your community, locally as well as globally. One who shows you that you are, in fact, not alone. That the world is full of people sharing your values, dreams, goals, and aspirations. One that allows you to connect and share without secret algorithms that have little concern for your long-term well-being. One that does not spy on you. One that allows you to be you in whatever way you like, but also requires you to pay everyone else the same respect and allow the same dignity.

Is Circles all this? Nope. Could it be all this? Perhaps. But most likely, it is a step towards something better and more democratic. Not the solution itself, but possibly the platform on which the long-term solution can be imagined and designed in an emergent and

collaborative process. The solution that connects all of us on this planet, including the non-human inhabitants and the living planet itself, in such a way that we truly begin to look after each other. Because humans have yet to operate in a system without scarcity, agenda and manipulation. It would be interesting to see what kind of a species we are if we are allowed to be the social creatures we are.

What we got right now (November 2022)

The current version of Circles is fairly basic and has yet to offer anything truly unique or groundbreaking from the perspective of the end user. If it has any relatively unique quality, it would be the map-based interface. This UX allows users to see where other users, groups, projects, and events are on a global map, all entities that we refer to as circles.

Each circle has the same basic features, be it a person, a community, a project, a place or an event. An introduction or a presentation that gives the visitor a brief overview, a public chat that is open to everyone, the option to see what circles it is connected to, which humans or profiles are connected to it, and any events relevant to the circle. In the case of the individual human, these events will be ones that the person is either attending or has created. In the case of a community circle, the events will be things that the community is organizing. However, all events show up on the same map, irrespectively of which circle or person they originate from, at least in the current version.

We've added a few features to the personal profile pages that other circles do not have, such as the option to select three questions to answer that act as an introduction. Personal profiles and all other circles can select or create a number of hashtags that define what the person or circle is about and will assist in both searches and matchmaking when these features are built.

We are currently working on finalising the chat function to allow private chats for circle members only and messaging, as well as the ability to include images and mentions of specific users (including circles) and automated notifications when a private message or a mention is received. When this is in place we will have a workable MVP.

Next steps:

We will explore three main areas over the coming months: democracy & governance, matchmaking and basic project management tools. We will also be making improvements to the UI and creating more options for the profile pages.

On the democracy & governance front, we will be working with the team from Flowback, which is an open-source liquid democracy platform. This will allow users to create polls, petitions, proposals and more content that can then be voted on in various ways. Flowback will also assist us with integrating the crucial delegation feature, allowing users to pass their vote on an individual they trust. The ability to select one's own delegates will be hugely useful as the network scales, allowing for broad interaction and granular decision-making. Flowback will also allow different forms of preferential voting and other useful features to manage community affairs.

The matchmaking function is one of the truly interesting features of Circles. It will allow users to automatically match with other users or circles that share their values and interests, both locally and globally. We are designing an offers and needs function where the individual's specific offers can match the needs other circles have posted. Though this function is designed to be automated, the same tags can be used in searches, should a user be interested in browsing local circles to see their requirements.

On the project management front, we are looking to integrate some basic tools to assist projects with planning. An issue many event planners face, particularly if they are planning an event relying on volunteers, is the unreliability of commitments through social media. A “Maybe” on Facebook is usually a no-show, but so are a significant amount of the “Attending” category. We would like to build a basic task manager where users can claim or take on tasks, and were following through earns them trust or reputation points. This will give event planners a more realistic idea of how many volunteers they will actually have, plus volunteers that fulfil tasks will have this linked to their reputation. The more you volunteer, the more likely others are likely to volunteer when you in turn need others to assist you on your project or event.

The value of Circles map-based interface is worth extra mention. Being able to spin the globe and zoom in and out with ease allows for a different kind of search behaviour with several perks. It obviously shows where our connections are relative to us in a clear geographical sense but it also prompts us to explore places we would never discover

through a text-based search engine or a social network that does not emphasise geographic markers. It also reminds us that we share a single planet, we share a home, in a way a simple flat map cannot do. For the digital generation, this is something akin to their parents or grandparents seeing the first picture of the earth taken by the Apollo missions. An added feature Circles makes use of is having lines show connections between the user and the various circles and other users they are connected to. It might seem like an unnecessary, even annoying, feature, but it quickly gets addictive for the best of reasons: it reminds us that we are not alone, that we are connected. This aspect of Circles we call The Atlas has huge potential, but more on this is later.

Where we are headed longer term

As Circles attracts more designers, developers and users, it will of course take on a life of its own, forking into many different directions and exploring new interfaces and new features that we have not anticipated.

From our side, we plan to work on various gamification options and provide more practical features that give users more agency, and help them navigate and use their time as intentionally and effectively as possible. The goal is to connect and empower, the rest is up to the users.

Trust is the key to human society. Where we don't have sufficient trust, we need clear contracts and other regulatory tools or things quickly fall apart. In spaces without accountability or follow-up or even a clear sender beyond a post, it is easy for insincere actors or even bots to bury actual useful content under close to limitless distraction and misinformation. On Circles, each posting is automatically underwritten by the person posting it, which is not unique to our platform in any way. However, the default setting we are working on will require posters to jump through some hoops to attach some costs to insincere posting.

Furthermore, when making factual statements, we will allow all users to rate posts for their relevance and veracity. The higher the number, the more likely the post is to be true and valuable to an ongoing discussion. These tools will require the user to pass a logical driving test of sorts to ensure they are deployed as correctly as possible. Users that post low-quality content, i.e. factual statements that the rest of the network regards as highly questionable, will themselves receive low trust rankings for veracity and relevance. This will allow other users to "filter out" noise and more quickly find high-quality content.

Note that having low scores for posting will not be baked into one's scores for task fulfilment. A person that is not very good at separating fact from opinion can still be hugely reliable when volunteering their time in other capacities.

That said, the purpose of designing such a system, which is entirely optional to make use of both as an individual and as a platform host, is not so much to penalise poorly researched content, but to encourage posters to improve the quality of their work. On other platforms, the game is to achieve views, likes, and followers in order to “go viral” which in turn has monetary and other rewards. This promotes extreme and divisive behaviour that gets appreciation from one’s in-group as well as attention in the form of outrage from one’s out-group. It does little to resolve issues or impact society in a positive way.

The goal of Circles is to connect people around common causes and acknowledge the value of diversity in both method and opinion. For most platform users, this will best be accomplished by finding allies, not inflaming one's opponents. Thus, there is good reason to take more care in one's posts. The higher your posts are rated for factualness and thoughtfulness, the more likely others are to rally to your side when you promote a cause.

Somewhat adjacent to this, we’d like to give every circle a library or repository where significant data and references can be stored, either openly or privately. As a circle can be a group, an event, a chat, or an individual, any number of libraries can be created and cross-referenced. So for instance, if a number of circles index a particular article or post as highly relevant, this data can be accessed when new users make searches. Over time what we’ll get is a user-curated library of the most highly rated reference material on any given topic instead of a proprietary algorithm-based search function that be privately manipulated for commercial purposes.

Such material can further be cross-referenced with the content rating of the poster, or other factors such as demography, language, region or profession. For instance, a younger person might be more interested in what other young people in similar environments find most useful among the collected referential data, as opposed to what the entire network values. Or perhaps this will turn out to be the same. The point is that Circles will allow many data points for cross-referencing and will provide these tools for anyone who wishes to use them or be part of them. In this way, Circles is not just an open-source project, it encourages further open-sourcing of data throughout its ecosystem.

Another area we are very keen to explore and develop is the atlas with all its potential functions. Being able to attach a real or virtual feature to a point in space and time within a shared and open ecosystem is an exciting feature in and of itself, but when expanding on this basic feature some very interesting options surface. Rather than single data points, entire mapping projects could be “projected” onto this interface. A world of data projected onto an accessible and familiar interface. The globe should be able to be viewed not just in its current form, satellite imagery with national borders, names, streets and buildings superimposed, but any type of data could be used in the same way. We could look at the world with a heat map overlay depicting languages or demographic data, energy flows, consumer patterns, temperatures or any other type of data relevant enough for someone to compile it. More than using such map overlays to represent any given statistic, at a deeper level they could divide the land not after current national borders. Still, they could show how these borders have shifted along the time axis. Or show the world through ethnicity, bioregions or a first nation perspective with no national borders at all.

The usefulness of such a tool, and common project, would be hard to exaggerate. All these map layers could be accessible through a drop-down menu, allowing users direct access to a shared interface, taking a big step towards solving the issue of information asymmetry between those who have access to detailed global data and those who do not as well as creating a shared and far more accurate view of the world, upon which we can start to explore shared solutions.

The ultimate use of Circles might actually turn out not to be that of a social networking platform but more of a decentralized, user-curated, geo-based search tool.

Destination Decentralisation

Though Circles is built in a centralized fashion, this is merely a temporary form. That we are headed towards a renaissance and a deep restructuring of the world wide web and the various processes fundamental to it should not surprise anyone reading this document. Equally, everyone should be aware that we are still very early in this fundamental shift and though there are fairly reliable decentralised options for simple transactions, running an entire network in a decentralized fashion is not yet possible. Awareness of this is crucial, and whatever we build from a back-end perspective is temporary. The user experience, however, is portable. Therefore it is one of the goals of the Circles project to use a centralised infrastructure to explore what a decentralised

system might look and feel like. It is also part and parcel of the process to move towards such an infrastructure in a step-by-step way.

The two steps we see as the most feasible to explore are a system of multiple servers hosting interoperable parts of the network and a system of decentralized, autonomous identities that can be used to store private data securely and connect with the greater network.

By building Circles as a multi-server network we can bypass some major challenges in network building. The multi-server solution allows independent networks to set up their own version of Circles rather than joining a different network and being “subservient” to that. Networks with more sensitive data will also be able to control their own databases better. Using an architecture of multiple separate databases, which is ultimately what we are working towards, requires a lot of effort to be put into interoperability. This in turn will provide valuable insights into how we are to take the ultimate step into the entirely decentralised space where each participant holds a part of the entire network. It also limits the responsibility of each server to manage its own content, which will probably benefit the dynamics of the network development. Each server will also choose what part of the greater Circles ecosystem it chooses to display

This strategy, if successful, will allow Circles to grow not just one user at a time but one instalment or server at a time. The network will grow as a network of servers sharing data through individual user requests. How these servers will be reimbursed for the service they provide can be resolved in several ways, but this is a financial more than a technical discussion. It is also a stepping stone on the path to a completely distributed system, where all information and all relationships are stored and curated by the end users, or nodes in the network.

As for the second ambition, we have taken a few experimental steps towards a decentralised network, built on IPFS, where the objective is that the end user stores their data locally and shares it with the network while online. When offline, nodes or users adjacent to the user will share the user's public data and will store requests on their nodes until the designated user returns back online, at which point messages and similar communication will be delivered. If and when this system works satisfactorily, an individual user will only need one profile which can be used as a key to access all networks the user is part of and will be able to store and share the same personal data with all networks. This data will be protected in the same way a crypto wallet is, with a

12 or 24-word encryption sequence, allowing a user a high level of data privacy, along with a soon-to-be-familiar interface.

The perhaps most important part of such an architecture is that each person or node will be connected directly with their friends and followers, not via a central networking hub as is the case today. Any individual can leave any network at any point in time yet still retain their friends, followers and community. Naturally, each individual will be able to message their followers individually or en masse, provided their followers accept receiving such communications, so the use of centralized platforms to reach out through will become increasingly less necessary.

Equally important, if not more, is that direct communication between nodes can be completely encrypted. If designed well, it will not be impossible for a third party, be it private or governmental, to eavesdrop on any communication. It will be impossible to even know if any communication is taking place at all. Most forms of private digital communication today come with meta-data leaks that allow third parties to map who is speaking to whom, from which many conclusions can be drawn and behavioural predictions made. Suppose these predictions are of behaviour frowned upon by the third party. In that case, the communicating parties are at risk no matter how innocent their actual communication was.

Repressive governments to both the right and left will have few issues with imprisoning on suspicion alone. If we can create such tools together, even communicational metadata will be taken off the table and true privacy might be an option again, at least in this space. But it is a crucial space, the space where new ideas are born, discussed and planned. If we are to have the freedom to evolve as a species we'll need the same freedom to act as humans as our ancestors did. This is why decentralised, autonomous identity and fully encrypted communication are so crucial.

A web of communities

The path to the individual leads through the community. It is within the community we understand where we end and other begins, and who we are within these parameters. Following a similar theme, the path to full decentralisation leads through community or the distribution of communities. Thus the ultimate goal is that anyone should be able to set up their own server and host their own community built on Circles. Third parties might provide these services for a fee and an ecosystem similar to the one surrounding

WordPress might evolve, only focussing on social networks rather than individual webpages. Third-party solutions for various social and practical community needs could be designed for plug-and-play implementation. Members of several networks could access them all through the main interface or Circle server of their choice and the connection between servers would be set up in a non-hierarchical fashion. All Circle servers would be sibling servers. The end users would simply select which servers to connect to, which would populate their individual atlas and whatever circles they select to be part of. Over time, the process could evolve to the degree that a simple Circle community app could be downloaded onto one's cellphone and an individual server set up there, acting as a hub in the larger ecosystem.

This hub would be indistinguishable from the personal node mentioned above for all intents and purposes, and full decentralisation would have been achieved. It is one of many paths we might take, but more importantly, a path that along the way would allow us to explore the protocols that work, that support more signal and less noise, that minimize division and maximize coherence, that allow us to find our common causes and meet our common challenges as a species. The path that inadvertently leads us towards that mythical being or state called the Superorganism, a vast and complex intelligence making decisions with the best interest of all of us, much as we, most of the time, make decisions that benefit the complex mass of cells that make up the organism we identify as ourselves. An agile, flexible, global neural network capable of solving challenges, allocating resources and consciously deciding on where to next for the ever-expanding circle of our species.

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