

Social Systems Lab

The Circles Project

An open-source social networking platform for co-creators and changemakers



In a paragraph

Circles, an innovative social networking platform, is the realization of two parallel visions. Designed for change-makers and co-creators, it functions as an open-source ecosystem, connecting individuals, movements, and political entities globally, while rooting activism and the co-creative spirit locally. A transformative initiative, Circles empowers its users to drive societal change.

Background


Circles represents the harmonious fusion of two passionate entities: Patrik Opacic, the innovative developer from Gråbo, Sweden, and the Social Systems Lab, the Cape Town and Stockholm-based operative arm of a Swedish foundation championing civic tech and community engagement.

Opacic's inspiration stemmed from his hometown, where he recognized a profound need for systemic change, more creativity and a deeper societal involvement. Merging his technical prowess with a fervour for societal transformation, he conceived Circles.

In parallel, the Social Systems Lab, with its democratic platform Crowdpol, was designing much-needed civic tools to promote sensemaking and support grassroots democracy. It was through a project rallying smaller political organizations for Sweden's upcoming elections in late 2021 when Opacic crossed paths with the team from the Social Systems Lab and the two parties realized the resonance in their visions. Recognizing the potential of their combined strength, they embarked on a mission, believing that the synergy between Circles and Crowdpol would not just be locally impactful, but could potentially be globally transformative.


Features

At its core, Circles is an open-source geobased social networking tool. But instead of your conventional feeds and fleeting interactions, Circles is designed for people who wish to make a genuine impact. Imagine it as a matchmaking space for those who have something crucial to say, want to engage more actively in society, or even someone from a remote corner of the world, longing to initiate change and seeking mentorship, collaborators and other forms of support. This platform enables individuals, movements, and even political parties to form "Circles" - dynamic communities focused on active cooperation centred around shared values, interests, and goals.


 *The name Circles is derived from the underlying architecture where all components and functions are circles within circles but also speaks to the organic shape of the circle as it permeates the natural world. Networks can thus be circles, containing event-circles,*

project-circles, hub-circles and of course individual members, who are circles onto themselves. This allows for a more fluid hierarchy.

Each Circle offers a range of functionalities: chatting, video conferencing, private messaging, shared calendars, and even interaction with custom AI assistants to coordinate activities, perform tasks and answer queries. What truly sets Circles apart, however, is its map feature. This intuitive interface allows users to discover and engage with Circles based on geographical proximity, ensuring that activism isn't just global but deeply local. With this, we hope to amplify the cross-pollination of ideas, letting different circles intersect, share, and collaborate effortlessly.

 *Holding a video conference on Circles allows users to see each other's profiles on the call, connect, see each other's location on the globe, share documents, and have a chat that persists beyond the call.*

Another hallmark of Circles is the powerful semantic network backing the platform, allowing for AI-assisted matchmaking and knowledge extraction. This ensures users find content, projects, and circles that resonate with their passions and missions.

 *A user can ask "Who on the platform is interested in Universal Basic Income and cats in my area?" and matches will appear on the map and in a list ranked by how well they match. Moreover, the user can ask the AI to create and invite those people to an event called "What can cats teach us about UBI?".*

But Circles is more than its technical prowess; it's about building a new model offering its users options that current social media and networking platforms cannot due to their for-profit business model and the restrictions this invariably translates into. The focus of Circles is on empowering individuals, lowering thresholds for engagement and impact, and emphasizing discoverability. Unlike mainstream social media platforms that primarily intend to capture attention (often causing distraction), sell ads, and nudge the behaviour of their users through undisclosed algorithms, Circles aims to serve the user's own intent and help channel it towards reaching their goals of positive societal change.

What's Next

In the immediate future, we plan to add a suite of tools for governance, including liquid democracy and a more advanced deliberation functionality, as well as basic tools for task management that can also be reflected on users' profiles, demonstrating their past and present service to their community.

We also intend to integrate funding options into the platform. This is part of the **Altruistic Wallet**, another core component ecosystem proposed by Social Systems Lab. In brief, the Altruistic Wallet is designed like any other digital wallet, but it can't be used on yourself, only on someone else. This is in line with our vision of an ecosystem of sharing and mutual support.

The wallet will also hold not only tokens that correspond to funds but also volunteering offers and other assets that wallet holders might want to contribute. This integration will make Circles useful as a crowdfunding platform that not only can support projects financially but also through volunteering and the sharing or donating of assets.

Long-Term Objectives

The long-term goal is to make Circles more decentralized, in line with the vision of increasing user autonomy, while allowing seamless communication, discoverability and transparent access to other Circles networks through a single local interface. Networks, after all, are dynamic organisms that consist of individuals and energy flows to where the activity is most dense. It only makes sense that such networks should consist of individual nodes, personal repositories and points of connection, allowing users to engage in projects and other activities across the greater network. Furthermore, the right to privacy and the right to both own one's data and manage one's relationships, be they friends or followers, independently of a third party as is the case with more or less all contemporary social networks, is crucial.

Tools Over Rules

Though Circles is a neutral project in most ways, the tools we build influence our behaviour in many ways. Circles is therefore being designed to promote pro-social behaviour and aims to avoid the incentive structures that fuel most for-profit social networks. We aim to design tools that will attract a community of pioneers, developers, activists, organizations and change makers willing to be early adopters. Changemakers and networks interested in improving our world in several ways, while they simultaneously act as test pilots for Circles and collectively help in creating an ecosystem of tools that can be used in our missions, on our own terms.

We are also designing tools to support taking virtuous action rather than merely signalling virtue, a phenomenon largely resulting from the constraints built into the most common for-profit social media platforms. Because making a real, measurable and lasting difference in the world requires a fundamental shift in how we design the tools to make this happen, not just a shift in attitude.

The goal for Circles, or at least for the initial version we are hosting at Social Systems Lab, is to cover its own running costs without relying on advertising or exploiting user data. We also want to abound the traditional “Fremium” business model. To achieve this we invite the users who can afford to donate monthly to do so, and in doing so allow other users with less financial means to get free access. To make sure we can comfortably manage the platform within our financial limitations, however, we will limit the total number of users to grow in tandem with our paying users. Users that contribute in other ways, such as contributing code or as moderators, or simply by volunteering for other projects hosted on circles, will of course also be prioritized. Any surplus arising from the activity within the network will be returned to the users through the Altruistic Wallet ecosystem, thereby providing funding to whatever projects the network’s members deem to be the most urgent or valuable. In time, the goal is that once Circles is fully decentralized, the tools will still be used to create value that can be distributed through the Altruistic Wallet ecosystem.

A Toolkit for Transformation

As one might glean from the above, Circles is more than merely a new platform in a space with plenty of contenders vying for one user group or another. Certainly, we are designing it in such a way that it will provide unique utility while respecting the integrity of its users, and through its open-source protocol, will allow users to continuously improve the platform itself, allowing new features and functions to evolve naturally. Stepping back from this, however, it should be clear that our ultimate goal is to influence society in a deep and transformative way, in the only way that this is possible: by providing a new technology or a new set of tools.

Where “disruption” is hailed as an end in and of itself within the tech culture evolving out of such spaces as Silicon Valley in California, the directionless nature of disruption coupled with the dominant incentive system of maximising profits rarely leads to beneficial outcomes to the broader population. A transformative technology takes the underlying systems into account and attempts to build incentives for more broadly beneficial outcomes. In the case of Circles, in combination with our second major project at Social Systems Lab, The Altruistic Wallet, we are attempting to build a new ecosystem for matching needs with offers globally, that goes well beyond the very limited options that our current system can provide. Through a fruitful combination of these two tools, we hope to develop a social networking system that supports caring, rewards sharing and strengthens identity by connecting it with purpose.

Our goal is to allow people across the globe to come together and support each other while encouraging people to spend less time behind their screens and more time in community, working to achieve things greater together, and through this discover what they have in common rather than focus on what sets them apart. To provide a globally applicable self-sovereign identity based on the individual’s contribution to their community, which in time might become the foundation of a truly democratically governed world that provides all humans with their basic needs and thus the freedom to contribute to others, while also regenerating the planet that sustains us.

Development

Circles is open-source and available on GitHub under AGPL3 license at:

<https://github.com/patrik-u/circles>

The platform is built on the following tech stack:

- Reactjs frontend
- Firebase backend (NodeJS API & noSQL database)
- OpenAI for AI embeddings and text completion
- Pinecone database for semantic network

It's a creative and fun project using cutting-edge technology, and we welcome contributors.

To find out more about the project and to explore the platform in a more practical way, visit the project webpage: makecircles.net

If you would like to contribute and co-create Circles with us, don't hesitate to reach out to us through circles@socialsystems.io

The Circles Team