

Strengthening Civil Society by Developing Stakeholder Communities using Intermedia¹

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Abstract

A healthy civil society is essential in order to deal with "wicked" societal problems. Merely involving institutional actors and mass media is not sufficient. Intermedia can play a crucial complementary role in strengthening civil society. However, the potential of these technologies needs to be carefully tailored to the requirements and constraints of the communities grown around them. The GRASS system for group report authoring is one carefully tailored socio-technical system aimed at unlocking this potential. Such systems may help to develop stakeholder communities that are more productive in societal conflict resolution.

1. Introduction

Globalization and (un)sustainable development are but two of many very complex phenomena presenting a host of problems that are almost insurmountable by modern society. The problems include many environmental, socio-economic and political conflicts, ranging from pollution, resource depletion and habitat loss to poverty, migration issues, and even wars. Such complex, situated and inter-related problems are also known as "wicked" problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are very hard to solve, because they have no definitive formulation and there is no single right or wrong solution. Addressing them therefore requires a careful exploration of their context and interdependencies in so-called issue nets (Conklin and Begeman, 1989). Too often, however, policy makers hamper societal decision-making by asking the wrong questions, limiting the scope of and participation in the required discussions, and not taking into account the larger context of the particular problem at hand.

Key decision makers include government and the corporate sector. Still, there are many other stakeholders who do or should influence the societal decision-making process, such as non-governmental organizations, academia, and certainly individual citizens who are directly affected by many policies. John Locke already recognized the importance of this *civil society* as a defense of human society against the power of the state and the inequalities of the marketplace (Frederick, 1993). Civil society has been characterized as the main source of communitarian virtues, while also being the domain of interest group

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conflict, the most important arena for public deliberation, and the authentic home of participatory democracy (Levine, 2001).

Clearly, this function of being an intermediary for societal conflict resolution is a very important one. However, civil society is a fuzzy and ill-defined concept. Often, only a tiny proxy of civil society is involved in key stakeholder debates. Of course, in large societies some sort of representative communication mechanism is necessary (Keane, 1991). Instead of involving all stakeholders continuously, just a subset is therefore often invited to be involved in an official participation "process" for a limited period of time before decision-making takes place. However, this particular approximation of civil society unfortunately leaves out many voices, and also fails to provide the permanence required for careful calibration, monitoring, and linking of individual opinions and policy decisions. The result: sub-optimal solutions, frustration, embittered cynicism and entrenchment of stakeholders in their re-fortified positions, e.g. (Drushka, 1999).

To remedy this situation, virtual communities can play a key role. Rather than defining a top-down, institutionalized form of civil society, Habermas envisions a re-energized, activist, engaged citizenry working together to create new small-scale communicative associative institutions that over time may either merge into larger ones or at least join forces (Froomkin, 2003). A good example are communities of rulemaking practice, in which the Internet allows the general public to actively participate in the interpretation of the effects of legislation and the formulation of socially acceptable rules (Noveck, forthcoming 2004). Such communities of cooperation can do for the public good what markets currently do on behalf of aggregated private interests (Barber, 1995). These forms of civil society have discovered the bottom-up use of cyberspace, as a space of distributed power, to transform society (Sassen, 1998). To realize this potential, however, many non-trivial issues such as access, social inclusion, and the development of a "democratic commons" need to be addressed (Roundtable for Australian Civil Society, 2003).

The main question is: how can virtual communities contribute to building a healthier civil society? Of necessity, many of these communities are comprised of adversarial stakeholders representing different interests. How can such communities ever work on joint solutions? True, some interests will be disjunctive and cannot be reconciled. However, part of the conflict in such communities is caused by *communication inefficiencies*: breakdowns in communication caused by process failures rather than interest incompatibilities. Inefficiencies include unclarity about the real issues and how to prioritize positions taken. Another example is the lack of trust between community members. Trust, even among adversaries, can grow by prolonged, transparent, and fair interactions. Virtual adversarial collaborative communities, in which opposing stakeholders try to explore joint solutions, can help reduce communication inefficiencies provided they have the right mix of technologies and social checks and balances (de Moor and Weigand, forthcoming 2004)

Much of the literature on virtual communities focuses on the micro or meso-level: what makes virtual communities tick, what kind of technological support do they require, how to organize their knowledge management, and how do and should these communities evolve over time (Brazelton and Anthony Gorry, 2003, Gongla and Rizzuto, 2001, Schubert and Koch, 2003)? In this paper, however, we adopt a macro-view by positioning virtual communities in a larger societal context. Our focus is on how virtual communities could contribute to healthier

societal debate. In Sect. 2, we examine the need to complement the mass media with intermedia. Sect. 3 describes GRASS (Group Report Authoring Support System) as one example of an intermedia system aimed at stakeholder consensus assessment. In Sect. 4, we examine how virtual communities could be developed around intermedia. We end the paper with conclusions.

2. From Mass Media to Intermedia

Traditionally, involvement of civil society in societal decision making debates occurs in two ways. First, there is the inclusion of selected stakeholders in official negotiation processes, which, as we have seen, raises many problems. Second, a wider and more diffuse debate takes place through the mass media.

A crucial role of the mass media is to inform the public. They thus have an important agenda-setting function. Through exposure to the same information and interpretation of events, the public focuses on the same issues (Martin and Chaudhary, 1983). This can be useful for concentrating societal attention and resolve in order to address issues. However, the mass media have many pitfalls. One issue is the fragmentation and discontinuity of public discourse (Postman, 1985). Often public debate is conducted in many media simultaneously, with records being very hard to access. A second, possibly even more serious issue is the concentration of media channels. The telecommunications markets currently so much in vogue restrict freedom of communication by generating barriers to entry, monopoly, and restrictions upon choice, and by shifting the prevailing definition of information from that of a public good to that of a privately appropriable commodity (Keane, 1991). Consequences of this market model are selective and biased reporting and the ignoring of criticism. Of course, sometimes there is outright manipulation of these controlled media (Palast, 2003, Solomon and Reese, 2003). Many distortions are not intentional, however, but caused by forces and constraints inherent in the Western mass media system (Hulteng, 1986, Herman and Chomsky, 1988)

The Internet has great potential to at least partially address these issues. The main difference with the mass media is that allows for distributed control of communication channels, embedded in civil society (Keane, 1991). Still, *the* Internet is only an overarching concept. Internet communication channels are enabled by many instances of different communication technologies like mailing lists or web fora. To stress the media role of specific Internet tools, we prefer to speak about *intermedia*. We define intermedia as those Internet technologies that are used to facilitate societal discourse. In contrast to the mass media, intermedia allow for public communication to become more interactive, international, interdisciplinary, and interorganizational. Still, different intermedia have different characteristics. A mailing list is an example of a push technology that allows a list member to distribute a message to all other members. A public organizational website, on the other hand, is a pull technology that permits anybody to access its information if and when desired, while the content is controlled by the site owner. These variations in functionality make that the particular technologies have different discussion affordances and constraints.

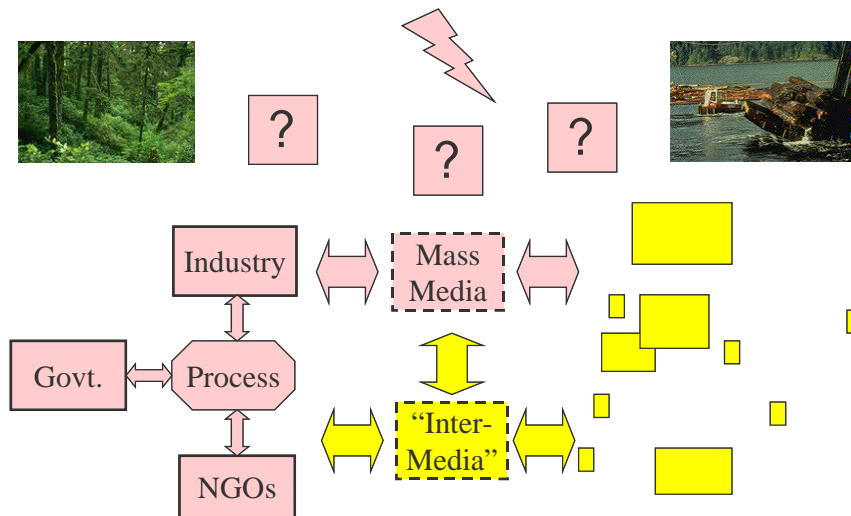


Figure 1 The role of intermedia in societal conflict resolution

Intermedia can perform different functions to address the weaknesses of the mass media, thus contributing to a greater legitimacy of decisions. We distinguish four important functions of intermedia:

- (1) They allow for more intensive *participation* by a greater number and diversity of stakeholders than before.
- (2) Decision makers can also get better *feedback* on decisions, not only in the form of hearings at the beginning and end of an official process, but also on different intermediate deliverables of finer granularity during the process.
- (3) Another very important role is that the effects of the implementation of public decisions can be *monitored* much more easily, as information preceding the decisions, as well as relevant actors, are much better accessible to affected parties who signal deviations from the agreed policies.
- (4) Because intermedia enable the creation of tailor-made communication fora, *trust building* between adversaries can be facilitated. Trust develops when there is a history of favorable past interactions that lead participants to expect positive future interactions, for which sustained communication opportunities are essential (Preece, 2002). Intermedia provide many such opportunities.

Fig. 1 shows the role of intermedia in societal conflict resolution. Major wicked problems, such as deforestation, create a wide range of issues. These issues are addressed in official negotiation processes by decision makers and selected representatives from civil society, such as NGOs. The mass media form the main communication conduit to the rest of civil society, but are complemented by intermedia. Also between mass media and intermedia there is a mutual relationship, as they influence each other in many subtle ways. For example, topics discussed in the mass media often lead to passionate discussion in intermedia, while journalists scan mailing lists and discussion fora to get ideas for new stories, thus giving intermedia an agenda-setting role for the mass media.

In this paper, we focus on adversarial collaborative communities that use intermedia to bridge the gap between informal civil society, its formal (partial) representatives such as NGOs, and societal decision makers such as governments and the corporate sector. One way for adversarial collaborative communities to use intermedia more productively, is in the authoring of group reports on societal

issues (Heng and de Moor, 2003). Group reports are prime examples of dialogic text. This type of text, contrary to traditional collaborative texts, reflects the involvement of multiple authorial voices (Harrison and Stephen, 1992). This means that conflicting opinions all find their way in the text, not covered up as compromises, but retaining their original form and strength. In that case, any joint statements can be considered to have been produced in true consensus. This allows – or forces - policy makers to make more explicit and well-argued choices, instead of being able to hide behind compromise reports that can mean anything to anybody.

We next describe the GRASS project, which aims at developing a carefully tailored socio-technical system for mediating the writing of such group reports.

3. The GRASS Group Report Authoring Support System

The purpose of the GRASS project is to develop an arena for credible societal discourse. Its aim is to produce concise group reports that give their readers an up-to-date and credible overview of the positions of various stakeholders on a particular issue. As such, these reports can play an important role in consensus assessment and catalyzing societal conflict resolution. In (Heng and de Moor, 2003, de Moor and Weigand, forthcoming 2004) , we describe the objectives, design principles, process models, functionality, and initial user experiences with GRASS in more detail. We there also position the system with respect to related systems grounded in the issue-based information systems paradigm (Kunz and Rittel, 1970). Here, we only give a brief outline of the design principles and functionality of the system, as our focus in the current article is on the role that intermedia systems like GRASS can play in a larger societal context.

3.1. Design Principles

Our view on the reduction of communication inefficiencies is grounded in Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984). Habermas distinguishes two important types of social action. Strategic action in short entails that participants in an interaction are mainly interested in the pursuit of their own goals. Communicative action, on the other hand, implies that opponents, although not necessarily agreeing on everything, at least share an interest in developing common ground in the form of shared situation definitions. For communicative action to flourish, an *ideal speech situation* is required. This situation requires a well-grounded argument in an open forum, which is governed by a set of clear discourse ethics rules for discursive equality, freedom, and fair play. Such rules provide a very different rationality than the mechanistic calculative rationality that governs many modern expert-driven debates, leaving many stakeholders and their concerns unrepresented (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1985). In contrast, communicative rationality is all about how to involve the widest possible relevant audience in the most intensive way.

The ideal speech situation is what it says, an *ideal* situation. In the messy reality of daily and political life, such a situation may not be naively assumed to exist. However, the discourse ethics can be operationalized by a set of design principles that form a system of checks and balances to approximate the ideal

situation as much as possible. These are the design principles embodied in GRASS:

- GRASS is to be an open forum: everybody can be an author.
- Editors increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the authoring process.
- Editors should be prevented from developing power positions: every author can be an editor, multiple authors can play an editor role.
- The aim is not to make decisions but to achieve true consensus via issue exploration.
- The document produced should be neutral (all positions and arguments are represented) and transparent (all discussion and report elements are visible to anybody).
- Participants should be motivated to take on responsibility.

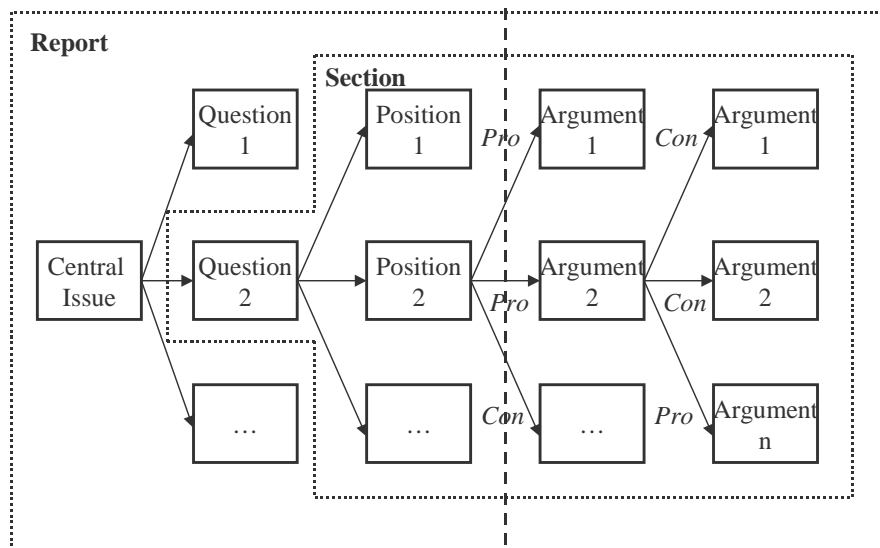


Figure 2 The Composition of Sections in GRASS Reports

3.2. GRASS Functionality

Each GRASS group report is subdivided into three main parts: (1) the problem description; (2) the sections; and (3) the report conclusion.

The *problem description* contains an *introduction* of the problem domain, the *central issue* that is the focus of the report, and a list of one or more *key questions*. The sections form the body of the report, in which the actual discussion takes place (Fig.2). Each section comprises a *section introduction*, the *key question* (or issue) to be examined as well as one or more *positions* that authors can take on this question. For each position, an author can indicate whether she supports, rejects, is neutral to it, or takes no position at all. For each position, *arguments pro* and *contra* can be entered. An argument can also be linked to other arguments,

thus forming an *argument tree*. A section is ended by the *section conclusion*, in which the various positions to the key question are summarized.

Each report is ended by a *report conclusion*, which summarizes the answers to the various key questions, and indicates areas for future research.

In order to become a report author, a user has to register. Several editor roles have been defined. One or more authors can fulfill each editor role. Every author can become an editor, if desired. An overall report editor is responsible for editing the problem description and report conclusion parts. The report editor can also add new sections. A section editor is responsible for editing the section introduction and conclusion. In each section, authors can add new positions and arguments pro or contra positions and other arguments. Positions taken can be modified continuously, reflecting a change of opinions held. Position descriptions and arguments, once made, cannot be modified, however, to prevent loss of discussion structure.

An important feature of GRASS is that it stores all report elements in a database, which could be used to generate group reports in different formats. At the moment, only one HTML-format has been implemented, but this feature could easily be extended to generate tailor-made summary reports, for example listing all issues that cause much discontent, as measured by a large variation in positions adopted. Reports could also be organized according to stakeholder roles played by the authors, for example the positions adopted by environmental organizations versus those taken by logging companies. Future versions of the system will also have advanced and customizable notification functionality, likely considerably increasing awareness and participation.

4. Building Virtual Communities around Intermedia

In this section, we will argue that intermedia like GRASS can contribute to a healthier civil society through the virtual communities being built around them.

Issue networks a good starting point to explore the relation between civil society, intermedia and virtual communities. In the traditional issue-based information systems literature, issue networks refer to the issues, their interdependencies, and associated positions and argumentation (Conklin and Begeman, 1989). Marres and Rogers (2000), however, define an issue network as a Web of [possibly opposing] organizations that a) discuss a common issue, b) acknowledge one another, and c) interconnect by multiple routes. The first definition stresses the semantic dependencies between issues, the second the way issues can be used as focal points for organizational network building. Our definition is an amalgam of these two: an issue network is a set of semantically interrelated issues embedded in one or more virtual communities in which the issues are created, linked, and interpreted. Note that our definition goes beyond organizations as the main actors in issue networks: one strength of virtual communities is that they cut across organizational hierarchies. Being fluid and open, virtual communities are potentially well suited as operational forms of civil society and able to conduct the extensive issue definition and exploration stage that should precede and succeed any societal decision making stage. Group report authoring could act as a catalyst for developing these issue networks in virtual communities.

Collaborative communities may represent a wide range of stakeholder interests. In the community case studies discussed in the literature, interests of members are often quite closely related, such as in patient self-help communities (Arnold et al., 2003). In adversarial collaborative communities, however, interests are often strongly opposed. Why then would anybody wish to participate in such a community? One reason may be the genuine need for integrative negotiation: having the joint objective of arriving at an acceptable solution for everybody (Walton and McKersie, 1965). Assuming that a credible arena for societal discourse such as GRASS exists, a stakeholder may be interested in initiating a report in order to investigate an issue, or to explain its position on this issue to others. What if other relevant stakeholders do not want to participate? In that case, the credibility of the positions of those who are willing to be held accountable in a fair debate is increased. Accusations by their opponents of their points of view being mere propaganda then become more difficult to maintain. Unless, of course, the opponent is willing to enter the arena to try and rebut the contested positions or arguments. By fostering these kinds of subtle dynamics, while guaranteeing discourse quality through the functionality and the checks and balances of a system like GRASS, stakeholders may be better motivated to join and participate in the discourse community.

So far, the argument for the need for intermedia in civil society and the role of virtual communities has been theoretical. However, community informatics, although informed by theory, should be firmly grounded in practice, as the following case describes.

4.1. Case: Forestry in British Columbia

The GRASS project emerged out of problems experienced in the BCFOR project. The British Columbia Forests and Forestry Group (BCFOR) Group was formed after a government decision to allow for clearcut logging in the Clayoquot Sound watershed on Vancouver Island in 1993. This decision was hotly contested. The conflict culminated in the arrest and conviction of criminal contempt of court of eight hundred people who non-violently blocked the logging roads (MacIsaac and Champagne, 1995). Obviously, there was a heavy public interest in the case.

In the BCFOR group, Canadian and international members discussed issues related to B.C. forests and forestry. About 15 core members were quite involved in frequent and intense interactions for at least a year at the peak of the conflict, turning the initially loose group into a rather tight community. The community consisted of a range of stakeholders, from timber industry consultants, government officials to environmentalists. Initially, only a mailing list discussion was conducted in which issues raised by participants were discussed. However, given the great public and personal interest in finding solutions to the crisis, the group members wanted to do more. It was decided after an intense e-mail discussion that the group should produce more tangible outputs that would help improve the quality of the public debate. The common objective would be to write a series of *group reports* in which forestry policies could be critically analyzed in a systematic way. Several generic tools, such as a mailing list and a web-based discussion forum were tried, but none was satisfactory. It was therefore decided to develop GRASS. The design principles and functionality presented in this paper

directly stem from many discussions and meetings with community members and others.

GRASS is not just a technology, but also a socio-technical system. The operationalizations of the design principles are not absolute, but continuously needs to be carefully tailored to the particular community of discourse. The design principles and outline of the GRASS functionality form the constitutional framework that ensures the credibility of the forum. Many degrees of freedom are still left, however, that can be used to experiment with different workflow processes to make the functionality really useful. For instance, one recent suggestion has been to superimpose a consensus seeking discussion process that is used by the people of the Nuu-Cha-Nulth tribes of Clayoquot Sound to resolve thorny conflicts². Broad issue exploration is at the heart of their discourse process.

Different communities may (and probably will) come up with different interpretations of what their legitimate discourse processes - and the socio-technical support these require - should be. Thus for GRASS to become really useful, a participatory community-centred development process is required, in which experiments can be done with, for example, which discussion protocol to use and if and how to enforce it (Preece, 2002). We are currently implementing a new version of the GRASS tool. A pilot report will be written by a B.C. community using the beta-version³. After that, real use cases will be built by establishing links with other B.C. communities who might benefit from the system. Once sufficiently tailored to real use needs, the new version of GRASS will be promoted to B.C. stakeholders at large.

One organization interested in experimenting with GRASS is the Dogwood Initiative⁴, Canada's only organization dedicated to land reform with the aim of transferring control of lands to local groups, communities, small businesses and First Nations. The goal is to make sure lands are managed sustainably. Given the many different stakeholders with often strongly opposing interests involved, and the large distances in British Columbia, using GRASS as an instrument for adversarial collaborative community building may turn out to be very useful.

5. Conclusions

A healthy civil society is essential in order to deal with the wicked societal problems that abound in our globalizing world. Just involving institutional actors and mass media is not sufficient. Intermedia can play a crucial complementary role in strengthening civil society. Quoting Hirschheim and Klein:

"At the level of individuals and organizations, the traditional values of a free press link to what we called the communicative function of IS. Once extended to the new information media, they will raise fundamental challenges to the role of IT in modern democracies. To meet these challenges, the communicative function of IS will have to assume a higher moral priority than its purposive rational function, at least in principle if not in practice as has been the case with the older information and communication technologies."
(Hirschheim and Klein, 2003).

2 Karla Point, personal communication.

3 <http://grass-arena.net> [launch June 2004]. The author wishes to thank Jaap Wagenvoort for his many efforts in reimplementing the initial prototype.

4 <http://www.dogwoodinitiative.org/>

For this communicative function of IS to be realized, the technologies used need to be carefully tailored to the requirements and constraints of the virtual communities built around them. GRASS is a continuously evolving, carefully tailored socio-technical system aimed at unlocking societal communicative potential by offering a credible arena for societal discourse in the form of group report authoring. However, it is only one of a whole class of systems. There are many related methods and technologies charting similar conceptual waters: from a host of generic discussion tools to systems specifically aiming to foster democratic discourse⁵. Most of these tools vary not so much in the basic argumentation and discussion functionalities used, which are often quite similar, but in how these approaches deal with their widely different social contexts of use. Very little is known so far about what critical success factors and context parameters result in making ICT successfully mediate a healthy societal debate, not in the lab, but out there in the real world. Instead of trying to produce one, ultimate tool, the development of and experimentation with a wide diversity of systems should therefore be encouraged.

The current version of GRASS is only the beginning of a continuously de- and refining of the functionality, the procedural checks and balances, incentives for use, and especially applications at the community and societal level. Now that the core idea has been formulated and implemented in relative detail, the hard – and fascinating - work of putting it to good use can begin.

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⁵ For example: issue-based information systems like gIBIS, QuestMap and Compendium (<http://www.compendiuminstitute.org/>); document production and annotation systems like the D3E digital document discourse environment (<http://d3e.sourceforge.net/>) and FreeText (<http://www.drostan.org/projects/fafo/>); and configurable discourse facilitation environments such as Unchat (<http://www.unchat.com/>) and Dito (<http://zeno8.ais.fraunhofer.de/zeno/>).

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