

Solutions for Economics, Environment and Democracy (SEED)

Workshop

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ABSTRACT

Quality of life for growing numbers of people on the planet is threatened by a set of integrated, systemic problems in the economy, environment and democracy. The goal of the SEED project is to form an international network of scholar/activists, advocates, and practitioners who seek to address these problems in a similarly integrated fashion. We are approaching this in two ways: first, by developing an online platform that connects our participants and facilitates sharing and assessing ideas and action experiments operating in local, national and international arenas; and second, by organizing a set of in-person workshops and other meetings of participants. This Communities & Technologies Workshop would be the first of these in-person workshops. Our goals for the workshop are three-fold: first, to help shape the plans for the SEED community; second, to present and discuss innovative proposals and work in this broad area; and third, for a key set of our participants from Europe, North America, and elsewhere to meet in person to help establish and further the connections among us.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** • **Human-centered computing**
→ Collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Problems of economics, environment and democracy; integrated approaches; networks of scholar/activists

1 BACKGROUND

Problem statement: Democratic failures, economic stagnation and inequity, and ecological collapse

Quality of life for growing numbers of people on the planet is threatened by a set of integrated, systemic problems in the economy, environment and democracy. But most parties and politicians continue to promote failed models based on growth at any cost, externalizing social and environmental burdens.

Vision: New economic models for people and planet

A small, distributed group of scholars and activists are starting to ask and answer tough questions, such as: what levels of economic production and consumption are realistic, and how can movements be more effective? They are developing ideas aimed at equity and quality of life, and levels of production and consumption that our planet can sustain (see e.g. [1,2,4]).

Challenges: Monopolized debate, isolated alternatives

Neoliberal market solutions dominate political conversations about economics, environment and democracy. These failed ideas and repeatedly aired fears stem from well-developed political networks across the globe that fill media spaces and advance bad policies that create economic and political turmoil. Meanwhile, democratic reform movements face resistance from established parties and interests, and fail to mobilize broader engagement among publics caught up in more immediate issues and economic crises. Despite incremental victories, the environmental movement continues to lose the fight for a more sustainable planet. The activists calling for changes in these areas of environment, economy or democracy too often operate in separate spheres, promoting reforms that fall short of systemic change.

Opportunity: Connective Action

To address these integrated, systemic issues and overcome barriers to making change, we need to build cross-boundary communities of knowledge prepared to interface more effectively with democratic institutions. Today, cutting edge progressive movements and parties are experimenting with the logic of connective action, using technology to flatten hierarchies and engage citizens in dialogue [3]. These large action networks often

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emerge as technology equipped crowds that occupy public spaces, but they tend to be chaotic and short lived. Many NGOs are developing broad coalitions that engage large publics in various issue sectors. Connective communication networks are helping to organize the hybrid movement-parties that are emerging in nations as different as Denmark, Spain and Portugal. While efforts are filled with good ideas, they need to be better coordinated and scaled up.

Toward an Online Platform

A key element currently missing from this political picture is a widely accessible information + action network for generating, sharing, and aligning ideas across issue sectors and diverse, geographically dispersed communities. Our vision for the SEED platform is that it will be a think-do network for economics, environment and democracy that uses information technologies to improve the scale and coordination of communication, public engagement, strategic action, and learning. This smart platform will connect an international network of thought leaders, advocates, and practitioners to share and assess ideas and action experiments operating in local, national and international arenas. The aim is to build creative visions, develop practices, assess successes and failures, and spread organizational models that interface effectively with democratic institutions.

This custom technology network will operate through dispersed hubs of activity that address local problems and spread creative solutions. Intelligent, semi-automated content tagging and curation will help user communities identify and bridge intellectual differences, and share promising political practices. Machine learning algorithms will help to alert network managers to areas of needed conflict resolution and idea alignment in order to develop deep engagement.

To move toward this vision, we are currently constructing an initial version of our platform, using off-the-shelf open-source software. It has two components: a library of position papers, articles, links to related organizations, and project descriptions; and a threaded discussion platform. Based on the content and usage patterns for this initial version, we should be able to refine our design for a more comprehensive SEED platform.

Impact

Our hope is that SEED will reshape political institutions and policies with democratic approaches that work for people. It will engage democratic institutions and challenge the dominance of neoliberal, elitist, grow-at-all costs economics and politics, integrating and spreading ideas on economic, environmental and democratic systems that are fair, representative and sustainable.

2 WORKSHOP PLANS

The organizers of the workshop are W. Lance Bennett, Alan Borning, and Volker Wulf.

Lance Bennett is Ruddick C. Lawrence Professor of Communication and Professor of Political Science at the University of Washington, Seattle, USA. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale University in 1974, and has taught

since then at the University of Washington. His current research interests include press-government relations and the quality of public information; communication and social movements; transnational activism; citizenship and youth civic engagement, digital media and political participation, and modeling the organization of technology enabled crowds.

Alan Borning is Professor Emeritus in the Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering, also at the University of Washington. He received his Ph.D. in Computer Science from Stanford University in 1979, and taught at the University of Washington from 1980 through 2016, with research interests in human-computer interaction and designing for human values, and in object-oriented and constraint based programming languages. He retired in March 2016, although not entirely successfully; current projects include systems to support civic engagement and participation, and designing and implementing a new reactive constraint programming language.

Volker Wulf is Professor at the University of Siegen, Germany, where he currently serves as the Dean of Faculty III (Economics, Business Informatics and Business Law). His research interests are in computer supported cooperative work, human computer interaction, knowledge management, computer supported cooperative learning, and software engineering and ubiquitous computing. In these fields, he has consistently focused on a practice-oriented approach, including empirical studies of work and life practices combined with user-centered development of innovative applications.

The goal of the SEED project is to form an international network of scholar/activists, advocates, and practitioners who are seeking to address problems of the economy, environment, and democracy in an integrated fashion. In addition to developing an online platform as described in the preceding section, we want to organize a set of in-person workshops and other meetings of participants. This Communities & Technologies Workshop would be the first of these. Our goals for the workshop are three-fold: first, to help shape the plans for the SEED community; second, to present and discuss innovative proposals and work in this broad area; and third, for a key set of our participants from Europe, North America, and elsewhere to meet in person to help establish or further the connections among us. To accomplish this, we plan to have a round of introductions, followed by 2-3 invited talks, and then a series of discussions, either among the group as a whole or subgroups of 5 or so participants. We will also invite participants to add appropriate position papers and other materials to the SEED library, either before or after the workshop.

REFERENCES

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