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Peace is more than the absence of hacks

by Martin Schmetz
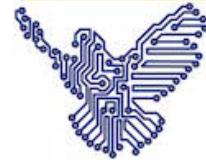
Part V of our **series** on cyberpeace

With everybody focusing on cyberwar, our blog has decided to discuss cyberpeace instead. So far we have seen musings **on war and peace**, the meaning of the term "cyberpeace" itself **and how we construct it discursively** and calls to end cyberwar **by focusing on the technical aspects again**. All of these points are valid. But I feel that they are limited in their scope, because they focus too much on the adversarial: The hacks, the malware, the evil hackers from North Korea. But peace is more than the absence of war – and, in our case, more than the absence of hacks. If we want to be serious about cyberpeace as a societal goal, we have to pay more attention to how we handle our data because this data has a huge impact on the peace within our society.

But let's take a step back. First of all: What is peace? Among the many definitions thrown around, one has has managed to stay relevant for decades: **Johan Galtung's** definition of negative and positive peace. I believe it is instructive in our case as well. At its core, negative peace is the absence of violence – if the air isn't heavily fortified with lead, we are pretty much experiencing peace. On the one hand, that seems like a workable definition. If there isn't war, we must have peace, right? On the other hand, everybody who has ever been in a situation of extreme social tension will know that it felt decidedly not peaceful despite a conspicuous absence of outright violence. Positive peace addresses exactly that: In order to actually achieve peace, a societal and/or social transformation has to take place. Trust has to be instituted, relationships have to turn from adversarial to collaborative. And intuitively, this picture seems a lot more peaceful than a simple absence of violence – yet this step is often just as arduous and may even take longer than simply stopping the fighting. The research done on transitional justice and post-conflict peacebuilding certainly can attest to that.

What does this have to do with peace on the internet? After all, nobody is shooting bullets at us over the internet or blowing up nuclear power plants (although the occasional steel mill **may have suffered**). And while harassing people over social media certainly isn't defensible, it is not what I want to focus at, either. Instead, I want to cast a wider net: With the increase in online service usage, our data footprint increases as well. And that data has potential for hefty negative social consequences.

The tip of the iceberg: The visible traces of data we leave

As usual, looking at satire is instructive in this case: When The Onion claims **that every potential 2040 president is already unelectable due to Facebook**, it is obviously a hyperbole. But nevertheless, there is a salient point made here: All of us, especially in our teens, have done and said some pretty embarrassing and likely stupid things. So far, we just had the benefit of it not being recorded for posterity. Basically indefinite data retention changes this.

Yet it is not clear whether we, as a society, are willing to forgive these past transgressions when faced with them as cleary later on. Sure, one might just about be able to forgive vague reports about someone having smoked weed when they were younger, but actual pictures or videos, complete with comments, are another matter.

And I am not sure whether it is just a generational thing, either: Even those that have been fully socialized in social media will likely cringe when they look at old parts of their social media footprint. Certainly, some curatorship takes place even years later, indicating that there are things that we only deem acceptable at that stage in life. The generational argument also presumes that the coming generations are completely homogeneous when it comes to values, which seems like a silly assumptions to make. Just because my circle of friends on some platform and I might feel that a comment is appropriate does not mean that the same can be said for a larger group in society. This factor alone offers enough breeding ground for future dissent.

But that does not mean that using social media or keeping an online foot print at all is the mistake to make here. These services have become an integral part of our lives. Self-censorship is not the answer. What is needed is a larger dialogue in society on how we deal with potential access to a vast slice of most everyone's past. And it cannot be about simply accepting it, either. The problem is not only that the data is there, it is that it shows in a much clearer way than before just how heterogeneous our society actually is – and enforcing homogeneity should not be the lesson we take away from this. Instead, what is needed is a way to forgive and actually celebrate diversity. Even diversity as exemplified in past stupidity on Facebok.

The scary bottom part of the iceberg: The data we don't see

But that is only the data we actually see and what we do with it as a society. The much larger part of the data that we leave all over the net every day is data we do not see, but that is still kept virtually forever. And that data says a lot about us and our lives. The fact that this data is kept for as long as it is – as long as the company's servers exists, possibly longer if it is mirrored elsewhere, such as in secret service databases – means that this data offers the possibility for much larger forms of surveillance.

And while this surveillance might not directly endanger our peace – after all, there is no direct violence involved – it leads to self-censorship, it creates paranoia, it erodes trust and the very fabric of a free and open society. And this very much is not compatible with the idea of positive peace. The existence of the data we leave out there becomes a vague threat in and of itself.

In short: If we want to talk about cyberpeace, the usual suspects of hacks, malware and what have you are absolutely worth talking about, sure. And seeing as the internet is part of all of our lives at this point in one way or another, these threats are undoubtedly not just a niche topic anymore. But cyberpeace as it is presented here actually goes much further: Because the internet has become such an integral part of our lives, this peace is just an aspect of a peaceful life in a connected, democratic society in general. The suffix just tells us that we should focus on this aspect more, at least for the sake of a discussion. But in the end, cyberpeace is not distinct from peace itself. It is just one facet of it.

This peace is threatened by the unchecked and unreflected persistence of data. As long as we do not come to terms with how we, as a society, handle the fact that we will not forget anymore (at least in the sense that the

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information will likely always be out there for someone to find), peace is threatened by unforgiving political discourse. But the data that we can't see threatens us just as much: We also need to understand the value of large amounts of data and how they can undermine the trust and stability in a society just by hanging over our heads like Damocles' sword. Cyberpeace is then not only a question of attacks from the outside. It is a question of peace within society due to our inability to forget or forgive. And it is a question of our personal peace, our peace of mind.

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