

Empowering Networked Individuals (and Practitioners) to Better Manage Conflict

by
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About the Author



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In October of 2014 I participated in the engaging discussion of professional identity, collaboration, and the future of our field at the ACR Annual Meeting in Cincinnati. In this article I want to extend some of my thoughts on the current social and technical environment that we are working in and suggest some possible ways to move the field forward. I want us to be careful not, in the name of professionalizing or monetizing Dispute Resolution, to give up on the ADR "social movement" dream of bringing improved conflict resolution skills to all walks of life. I hold high hopes for the current and future digital humanitarians and peacemakers among us and seek a future that makes space for them in the dispute resolution landscape.

People are more plugged in than ever. Even while relaxing in their own homes, people are communicating with other family members and friends via social networks and text messaging.

With the rise and spread of mobile connectivity and ubiquitous social media platforms the range of communication channels open to us has just continued to expand. In order to be forward thinking, ACR and its members should remain cognizant of societal shifts in communication patterns and adapt accordingly.

THE GROWTH OF NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

In my online course on Communication Technology and Conflict at Wayne State University I have students read *Networked: The New Social Operating System* by Lee Rainie (Pew Research Center) and Barry Wellman (NetLab, University of Toronto). The authors have spent years systematically studying the impact of the internet on our social and civic lives. Their book documents a profound shift that has occurred in social relations, leading to a new way of life they have called *Networked Individualism*. This new form has emerged as people adapt to three major social trends. In brief, these are:

- The personal, mobile and always-accessible nature of information and communication
- The turn away from distinct groups and toward broader social networks
- The proliferation & differentiation of a highly personalized internet

People are more plugged in than ever. Even while relaxing in their own homes, people are communicating with other family members and friends via social networks and text messaging. People are now behaving like unique nodes in a relational network, each of whom is addressable via their own mobile phone number or social media ID. These individual mobile actors, each at the center of their own network, have unique "rolodexes" of social ties and information resources that can be accessed and perhaps mobilized.

Now, rather than relying on a small core group of place-bound core associates (family, church, work-mates, etc.) for everything, people can meet their social, emotional, and economic needs by tapping into these loosely-knit networks of diverse associates. These networks can be quite specialized and are often distinct from one another. We may go to one person/group/website to get help with pets or garden plants; another for medical advice; a third for film opinions; and others for gaming tips, financial advice, shoulders to cry on, homework help and more.

Our online identity and persona may be differently enacted across these various networks and things can get messy when they overlap in unexpected ways. Issues of privacy are especially complex because today's young people rely on semi-public social networks for many of their closest relationships, as Danah Boyd describes in *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Because these looser and more diverse networks require more choreography and exertion to manage, people with the social emotional and technical skills for handling these are exhibiting important new forms of social emotional literacy.

ACR members want to be a sought-after part of the potential network of "trouble experts" people turn to when they are faced with challenging conflicts, social drama or complicated social negotiations. Are we promoting the needed networked communication skills among our membership? Bernie Mayer encouraged

us to be conflict engagement specialists, and to do so in a relevant ways we'll need to get and continue to be social network savvy. Easier said than done, of course.

BREAKING THROUGH THE FILTER BUBBLE

Our web is becoming quite personalized, both by choice and by algorithm. The more we use various news, search and social networking platforms, the more these services become tailored to our specific interests, political preferences and shopping habits, simply filtering out information that doesn't fit our evolving taste profile and advertising demographic. This phenomenon has been labeled "the filter bubble" by internet activist Eli Pariser. Search algorithms and news feed generators filter out items that you don't appear to be interested in, increasingly limiting and specializing the scope of what is available to you. This kind of biased and selective perception has significant implications for the possibility of informed and civil discourse, and for the ability of people to find new resources or perspectives outside their normal pathways of interaction. Our field will need to find ways to remain visible and relevant in highly filtered communication channels, and to find strategic ways to broaden disputant's frames of information reference when they are engaged in polarized and personalized conflicts.

TIME TO REVISIT/REVISE THE SOCIAL NETWORK MEDIATOR ROLE?

In *The Mediation Process*, written well before the internet became so deeply embedded in our lives, Chris Moore sought to categorize the types of mediators he was aware of. Broadly, these types include:

- **Authoritative Mediator** – has some power over the parties, wants outcome to stay within certain parameters, but chooses to seek a mutual agreement from parties rather than attempting to impose a solution. Common in hierarchical environments and cultures.
- **Independent Mediator** – no significant relationship to the parties, built on an assumption of neutrality and impartiality.
- **Social Network Mediator** – respected, known to both parties, perhaps not neutral or uninterested, but thought to be fair. Goal is to maintain group stability over time. Common in collectivist cultures.

Moore notes that in North America, thought to be a predominantly individualist rather than collectivist culture, we have shown a decided preference for the Independent Mediator. The expectation has been that when conflict gets bad enough, disputants will seek out a "neutral" and independent mediator, typically one working within the

long shadow of the law. I think it is fair to say that ACR has been largely structured to support these kind of independent mediators who are seen as the core professionals in the field. These typically contracted-by-the-job mediators are kept separated from the rest of our lives, serving one purpose only. This would be similar to how many of us treat a financial specialist or sports coach or healthcare provider.

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While many North Americans may still have strong individualist tendencies, the social network has changed what is possible and what is needed. I believe now is the time to get to work supporting a new kind of *Social Networked Facilitator/Mediator* that fits more neatly within the modern lives of networked individuals. This new identity will situate us as recognized and trusted network-visible presences, hopefully packing a communication and negotiation support toolkit offering wide utility and rapid response. While what this might end up actually looking like for us as individuals and for ACR as a whole is still unclear, in the next section I'll share some ideas about core elements that could be useful.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE CHANGING FORMS OF "PRESENCE AWARENESS"

Today various prompts and status updates alert us to the presence or absence of other people in our personal networks and keep us updated on some of the things they are doing or feeling. Location-aware apps and search engines show us food, retail and social opportunities that are nearby. Reminders can be set to pop-up at designated times. As wearable technologies like the Apple Watch and Google Glass and Fitbit spread this trend is likely to accelerate. This year Google CEO Eric Schmidt told business leaders at the Davos conference that in the near future "the internet will disappear." With so many connected devices, "we'll all be experiencing our digital connections as a seamless part of our everyday world."

People's ongoing "presence awareness" is potentially both helpful and problematic with respect to conflict resolution. On the downside, a key issue is the problem that we really only have a certain amount of available attention and it can quickly get scattered. Because of a fear of missing out on something important, people attempt to pay "continuous partial attention" to many streams of communication and information

(think Facebook, Twitter, text-messages, etc.). This multitasking kind of attention pattern can lead to a lack of depth and jumps to judgment based on a limited amount of information skimmed in a hurry.

On the upside, these almost-always-active communication streams can be quite useful for distributing context-relevant coaching, for trend spotting and tracking, environment monitoring, and needs assessment. When we are in problem-solving mode they can serve as valuable tools for information verification and issue/knowledge expansion. ACR and its members should be taking advantage of this upside when working with people who are engaging with conflict by finding ways to fit into their attention streams offering relevant information or advice at opportune moments.

FAST-ACCESS TO DOMAIN SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND MODULAR RESPONSE SETS

Part of the future I see for the field includes mobile access for CR practitioners to well-structured and bite-size knowledge collections tailored to the various conflict sub-domains such as family, environment, construction, landlord/tenant, employment, social justice etc. of the field. These curated collections will help conflict specialists offer timely and relevant advice and strategy recommendations with information available via links suitable for sharing in social media or text message channels. ODR systems often include a "favorite clips" collection of text snippets that can be reused by mediators and we can build on this idea. The long-standing CRInfo.org knowledgebase project and others like it provide a solid foundation for moving forward on work to quickly triage emerging conflicts and then review possible responses. Modern mobile apps, like the simple contracts creation and management app Shake point provide current examples we can learn from as well.

STREAM FILTERS AND ANALYSIS TOOLS DESIGNED FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT

The sheer amount of data gathered today on many aspects of people's lives is amazing. Social media sites already are filtering what they show to us, but typically not in ways that help us to be better conflict engagement specialists. We will need to build and use context-sensitive conflict filters to help us flag emerging conflicts in our networks and then provide



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needed attention and support to addressing the situation. Email tools like ToneCheck already serve to help take the potential sting out of email text before we sent it. For some examples in this area in the social media space, consider [Facebook's compassion research](#) team's work with regard to better suicide prevention and scaffolded support for responding to posts that you consider problematic.

One particular challenge here will be knowing what channels of communication are currently being used by participants in various social and interpersonal conflicts and paying attention to the potential escalation of the conflict via means that we aren't even aware of. For example, in a recent study I did on students' perceptions of peer mediation as expressed on Twitter, I came

across numerous examples of active and sometimes hostile and escalatory communications being sent via twitter during the course of active mediations between groups. Student disputants were monitoring their smart phones, while the mediators apparently were left in the dark. The solution of forcing everyone to put away their phones during a mediation will not adequately address this problem, especially as fewer and fewer mediations occur around the formal bargaining table, and more occur on the go as part of the ongoing stream of interactions. Asking people how and with whom they communicate about a given social conflict may need to become a core practice going forward.

AN EXPANDED SPECTRUM OF SUPPORTED COMMUNITY ROLES FOR CONFLICT ENGAGERS

My session at this year's annual ACR conference in Reno will review key theories our field has developed regarding who makes a good conflict intervenor, with an invitation for us to expand and refine our concepts of what work counts as conflict resolution and who ideally should be doing it. As we move forward, I'm hoping that we'll see a return to the idea of **community empowerment** as a key aspect of conflict resolution. For instance, I'd love to see a broadening of the spectrum of conflict engagement roles we prepare dispute resolution volunteers for, moving well beyond mediation of discreet legal disputes as the default. Bill Ury's concept of the Third Side, described in his book of that title, provides a useful framework that we must begin to flesh out within the

social network spaces we now inhabit. This will involve identifying and encouraging active bridge-builders and peacekeepers and healers and witnesses and more to play their parts in preventing violence and destructive conflict. Much of this work will occur remotely via mobile forms of communication that takes shape over time in small bits and pieces.

I'd like to see a reinvigoration and "redeployment" of the amazing cadre of volunteer mediators who have already been trained over the years by community mediation centers, giving them new roles and legitimacy as skilled third-siders of everyday life who are supported and sustained by a network of on-demand tools and knowledgeable fellow travellers. Patrick Meier's new book *Digital Humanitarians* tells the compelling story of crowd-sourced crisis mappers who have found increasingly sophisticated ways to be helpful in serious and dangerous crisis and conflict settings. Given the right encouragement ACR and NAFCM may represent a great "talent pool" from which the future generations of digital humanitarians emerge.

Wayne State University students and I are experimenting with expanded roles for our field in our [East Side Conflict Resolution Outreach](#) (ESCRO) project in Detroit. Our hope is that these "East Side Third Siders" will use their voices to normalize constructive conflict and to provide witness to injustice or norm-breaking behavior. To facilitate this work, we've moved our Final Seminar course to a local high school and we invite the public to join us for a series of Monday night skill-building sessions facilitated by graduate students and program alumni. We've also worked with the local library and city government to promote conflict skills development via a Unity in the Community Resource Fair, website, and other outreach initiatives.

A BROADER SPECTRUM OF PROFESSIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION ROLES

At Wayne State University's May 2015 conference on Urban Dispute Resolution and Public Policy I promoted the idea of a kind of "Code for America" or "Google Summer of Code" deployment and embedding of conflict resolution system specialists within government and nonprofit agencies. The goal would be to help our civic agencies build new policy consensus and conflict resolution tools and processes that take better advantage of current technology and increasingly transparent public data sets. This will require a new kind of dispute systems design specialist who is not afraid of big data and public involvement or the problems of polarized government and shrinking budgets. Not a small ask, but I think we can do it, and many of graduate programs in dispute resolution could be ideal launch pads for a deeper engagement

with civic governance structures. The Internet Bar Organization's [Tech for Justice Hackathon series](#) is doing some pioneering work in this area and is worth watching.

MOVING FORWARD

As we explore the new place for socially networked mediators, I believe new forms of acknowledged professional dispute resolution roles will be developed. We may see more roles like *Communication Technology Platform Facilitator* whose job is to provide the purpose-built "Social AV Equipment" needed by modern-day conflict professionals. We'll also see new roles for on-demand negotiation and conflict management coaches, creative new forms of organizational ombuds, and network-savvy conflict resolution educators

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and social emotional skills trainers. As new communication tools emerge, we'll learn to adopt and adapt our practices to promote constructive conflict management in ways that matter to the ever-plugged-in Networked Individualist.

While it really IS complicated, I believe we can and must learn to enact different conflict resolution roles within the various channels and contexts we inhabit. This will likely mean we'll be more opinionated advocates in one channel while serving as the neutral bridge-builder or mediator in another. This heightened channel and context specificity just makes good sense despite our espoused love of neutrality and precise role definitions. Perhaps our young people who have been living fully networked lives will help us understand this complex identity management work in new ways that will serve the field. With a tip of the hat to the ACR New Voices team, we must continue to find ways to invite in new voices offering expanded perspectives and/or calming influences into the social streams where and when they might be most useful.

While the future of networked conflict resolution is forever in the making, I'm up for the adventure and hope many of my ACR colleagues are as well. If you are available November 2-6, 2015, consider joining us online at ODR Cyberweek 2015 (hosted at www.ADRHub.com) to continue the conversation. ■