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Intended status: Informational G. Perez de Acha

Expires: May 6, 2021 Derechos Digitales

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November 02, 2020

Freedom of Association on the Internet

draft-irtf-hrpc-association-06

Abstract

This document discusses the relationships between the Internet

architecture and the ability of people to exercise their rights to

freedom of assembly and association online. The Internet

increasingly mediates our lives, our relationships, and our ability

to exercise our human rights. As a global forum, the Internet

provides a public space, yet it is predominantly built on private

infrastructure. Since Internet protocols play a central role in the

management, development, and use of the Internet, we analyze the

relation between protocols and the rights to assemble and associate

to mitigate infringements on those rights.

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1. Introduction

“Article 21 of the Covenant protects peaceful assemblies wherever they take place: outdoors, indoors and online; in public and private spaces; or a combination thereof.

* General Comment 37 of the Human Rights Committee (2020)

"In the digital age, the exercise of the rights of peaceful assembly

and association has become largely dependent on business enterprises,

whose legal obligations, policies, technical standards, financial

models and algorithms can affect these freedoms".

- Annual Report to the UN Human Rights Council by the Special Rapporteur

on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (2019).We shape our tools and, thereafter, our tools shape us.&#8202;

- John Culkin (1967)

The current draft continues the work started in "Research into Human

Rights Protocol Considerations" [RFC8280] by investigating the impact

of Internet protocols on a specific set of human rights, namely the

right to freedom of assembly and association. Taking into

consideration the international human rights framework regarding the

human rights to freedom of assembly and association, the present

document seeks to deepen the relationship between these human righte

and Internet architecture, protocols, and standards. In that way, we

continue the work of the Human Rights Protocol Consideration Research

Group, as laid out in its charter, where one of the research aims is

"to expose the relation between protocols and human rights, with a

focus on the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly"

[HRPC-charter]. The conclusions may inform the development of new

guidelines for protocol developers in draft-irtf-hrpc-guidelines.

The research question of this document is: what are the protocol

development considerations for freedoms of assembly and association?

2. Vocabulary used

Architecture The design of a structure

Autonomous System (AS) Autonomous Systems are the unit of routing

policy in the modern world of exterior routing [RFC1930].

Within the Internet, an autonomous system (AS) is a collection of

connected Internet Protocol (IP) routing prefixes under the

control of one or more network operators on behalf of a single

administrative entity or domain that presents a common, clearly

defined routing policy to the Internet [RFC1930].

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The classic definition of an Autonomous System is a set of routers

under a single technical administration, using an interior gateway

protocol and common metrics to route packets within the AS, and

using an exterior gateway protocol to route packets to other ASs

[RFC1771].

Border Gateway Protocol (BGP) An inter-Autonomous System routing

protocol [RFC4271].

Connectivity The extent to which a device or network is able to

reach other devices or networks to exchange data. The Internet is

the tool for providing global connectivity [RFC1958]. Different

types of connectivity are further specified in [RFC4084]. The

combination of the end-to-end principle, interoperability,

distributed architecture, resilience, reliability and robustness

are the enabling factors that result in connectivity to and on the

Internet.

Decentralization Implementation or deployment of standards,

protocols or systems without one single point of control.

Distributed system A system with multiple components that have their

behavior co-ordinated via message passing. These components are

usually spatially separated and communicate using a network, and

may be managed by a single root of trust or authority.

[Troncosoetal]

Infrastructure Underlying basis or structure for a functioning

society, organization or community. Because infrastructure is a

precondition for other activities it has a procedural, rather than

static, nature due to its social and cultural embeddedness

[PipekWulf] [Bloketal]. This means that infrastructure is always

relational: infrastructure always develops in relation to

something or someone [Bowker].

Internet The Network of networks, that consists of Autonomous

Systems that are connected through the Internet Protocol (IP).

A persistent socio-technical system over which services are

delivered [Mainwaringetal],

A techno-social assemblage of devices, users, sensors, networks,

routers, governance, administrators, operators and protocols

An emergent-process-driven thing that is born from the collections

of the ASes that happen to be gathered together at any given time.

The fact that they tend to interact at any given time means it is

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an emergent property that happens because they use the protocols

defined at IETF.

3. Research question

The research question of this document is: what are the protocol

development considerations for freedom of assembly and association?

4. Methodology

The point of departure of the present work [RFC8280] is an initial

effort to expose the relationship between human rights and the

Internet architecture, specifically protocols and standards. As

such, [RFC8280] was inductive and explorative in nature. The

methodology in this previous work was based on the discourse analysis

of RFCs, interviews with members of the IETF community, and

participant observation in IETF working groups, with the goal to

identify technical concepts that relate to human rights. This work

resulted in the proposal of guidelines to describe a relationship

between the right to freedom of assembly and association and

connectivity, security, censorship resistance, anonymity,

pseudonymity, accessibility, decentralization, adaptability, and

outcome transparency.

In this document, we deepen our exploration of human rights and

protocols by assessing one specific set of human rights: freedom of

association and assembly, abbreviated here as FAA. Our methodology

for doing so is the following: first, we provide a brief twofold

literature review addressing the philosophical and legal definitions

of FAA and how this right has already been interpreted or analyzed

concerning the digital. This literature review is not exhaustive nor

systematic but aims at providing some lines of questioning that could

later be used for protocol development. The second part of our

methodology looks at some cases of Internet protocols that are

relevant to the sub-questions highlighted in the literature review,

and analyze how these protocols facilitate and inhibit the right to

assembly and association.

5. Literature Review

5.1. FAA definition and core treaties

The rights to freedom of association and assembly are defined and

guaranteed in national law and international treaties. Article 20 of

the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] states for instance

that "Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and

association" and that "No one may be compelled to belong to an

association". Article 23 further guarantees that "Everyone has the

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right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his

interests". In the International Covenant on Civil and Political

Rights [ICCPR], article 21 stipulates that "The right of peaceful assembly

shall be recognized" and that "No restrictions may be placed on the

exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with

the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the

interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre

public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection

of the rights and freedoms of others" while article 22 states that

"Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others,

including the right to form and join trade unions".

General Comment No. 37 on the right of peaceful assembly by the United Nations Human Rights Committee affirms that the right of peaceful assembly protects non-violent online gatherings: “associated activities that happen online or otherwise rely upon digital services […] are also protected” [UNGC37]. Interference with emerging communications technologies that offer the opportunity to assemble either wholly or partly online or play an integral role in organizing, participating in and monitoring physical gatherings are assumed to impede assemblies which are protected by this right. Moreover, any restriction on the ‘operation of information dissemination systems’ must conform with the tests for restrictions on freedom of expression (see below).

Other treaties

are sometimes cited as the source and framework to the right to

freedom of association and assembly. Such as Article 5 of the International Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination [CERD] which

stipulates freedom of peaceful assembly and association should be

guaranteed "without discrimination as to race, colour, national or

ethnic origin"; Article 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the

Child [CRC] which recognises to child pending the restrictions cited

above; and Article 21 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities [CRPD] which insist on usable and accessible formats and

technologies appropriate for persons with different kinds of

disabilities. The freedoms of peaceful assembly and association are also protected under regional human rights treaties: article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, articles 15 and 16 of the American Convention on Human Rights, article 10 and 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

From a more philosophical perspective, Brownlee and Jenkins

[Stanford] make some interesting distinctions in particular regarding

the concepts of association, assembly and interaction, deviating somewhat from what is established in interpretations of international human rights law.

"Interaction" refers to any kind of interpersonal and often

incidental engagements in daily life, like encountering strangers on

a bus. Interaction is seen as a "prerequisite" for association.

Assembly, according to Brownlee and Jenkins has a more political connotation and is

often used to refer to activists, protesters, or members of a group

in a deliberating event. . The authors refer to association as

more "persistent connections" and distinguish between intimate associations,

like friendship, love, or family, and collective association like

trade unions, commercial business, or "expressive associations" like

civil rights organizations or LGBTQIA associations. For Brownlee and

Jenkins [Stanford], the right to association is linked to different

relative freedoms: permission (to associate or dissociate), claim-

right (to oppose others interfering with our conduct), power (to

alter the status of our association), immunity (from other people

interfering in our right). Freedom of association thus

refers both to the individual right to join or leave a group and to

the collective right to form or dissolve a group.

Freedoms of association and peaceful assembly, however, are relative and not absolute.

Excluding someone from an association

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based on its sex, race or other individual characteristic is also

often contentious if not illegal. As mentioned above, international human rights law provides the framework for legitimate restrictions on these rights, as well as the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression and opinion. Restrictions can be imposed by states, but only if this is lawful and

proportionate. States must document how these limitations are

necessary in the interests of national security or public safety,

public order, the protection of public health or morals, or the

protection of the rights and freedoms of others. Finally, states

must also protect participants against possible abuses by non-State

actors.

The Human Rights Committee explores a few restrictions related to associated activities online or reliant upon digital services, that are also protected under article 21, and stipulates that “States parties must not, for example, block or hinder Internet connectivity in relation to peaceful assemblies. The same applies to geotargeted or technology-specific interference with connectivity or access to content.”. Additionally, “States should ensure that the activities of Internet service providers and intermediaries do not unduly restrict assemblies or the privacy of assembly participants.” [UNGC37].

Interpreting international law, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of

association protect any collective, gathered either permanently or

temporarily for "peaceful" purposes, online and offline. It is important to underline

the property of "freedom" because the right to freedom of association

and assembly is voluntary and uncoerced: anyone can join or leave a

group of choice, which in turn means one should not be forced to

either join, stay or leave. .

An assembly is an “intentional and temporary gathering of a

collective in a private or public space for a specific purpose:

demonstrations, indoor meetings, strikes, processions, rallies, or

even sits-in”; Association has a more formal and established

nature and refers to a group of individuals or legal entities

brought together in order to collectively act, express, promote, pursue, or

defend a field of common interests [UNSRFOAA2012]. Think about civil society

organizations, clubs, cooperatives, NGOs, religious associations,

political parties, trade unions, or foundations.

When talking about the human rights of freedom of association and

assembly, one should always take into account that 'all human rights

are indivisible, interrelated, unalienable, universal, and mutually

reinforcing' [ViennaDeclaration]. This means that in the analysis of

the impact of a certain variable on freedom of association and

assembly one should take other human rights into account too. When

devising an approach to mitigate a possible negative influence on

this right, one should also always take into account the possible

impact this might have on other rights. For example, the following

rights are often impacted in conjunction with freedom of association

and assembly: the right to political participation, the right to

(group) privacy, the right to freedom of expression, and access to

information. For instance, when the right to political participation

is hampered, this often happens in conjunction with a limitation of

the freedom of association and assembly because political

participation is often done collectively. When the right to privacy

is hampered, this privacy of particular groups is also impacted (so-

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called 'group privacy' [Loi], which potentially has consequences for

the right to association and assembly. Where the freedom of

expression of a group is hampered, such as in protests or through

Internet shutdowns, this both hampers other people's ability to

receive the information of the group, and impact the right to

assembly of the people who seek to express themselves as a group

[Nyokabi].

Finally, if the right to association and assembly is limited by

national law, this does not mean it is consistent with international

human rights law. In such a case, the national law would therefore

not be legitimate [Glasius].

5.2. FAA in the digital era

Before discussing freedom of association and assembly as it pertains

to digital environments, we must first recognize that the United

Nations Human Rights Council adopted resolutions on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet in 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018, affirming and reaffirming "... that the same rights that people have offline must

also be protected online ..." [Resolution]. Therefore the digital environment is

no exception to application of this right by any means. Various other resolutions and report have established the online applicability of the freedoms of association and assembly, most recently and authoritatively by the Human Rights Committee in General Comment 37 (2020)[UNGC37]. The

questions that remain, however, are how these rights should be

conceptualized and implemented in different parts and levels of

digital environments.

The right to freedom of assembly and association online is the subject of

increasing discussions and analysis. Especially since social media played an important role in several revolutions in 2011, which has led to increasing and ever more sophisticated attacks by autocratic governments on online communities and other associational activities occurring on the Internet [RutzenZenn].In 2016, the Council of Europe

published a report, "Report by the Committee of experts on cross-

border flow of Internet traffic and Internet freedom on Freedom of

assembly and association on the Internet" [CoE] which noted that

while the Internet and technologies are not explicitly mentioned in

international treaties, these treaties nevertheless apply to "the

online environment". The report argue the "Internet is the public

sphere of the 21st century", something demonstrated by the fact that

informal associations can be gathered at scale in a matter of hours

on the Internet, and that digital communication tools often serve to

facilitate, publicize or otherwise enable presential associations or

assemblies, like a protest or demonstration. They note, on the other

hand, the negative ways in which the Internet can also be used to

promote or facilitate terrorism, urban violence and hate speech, thus

insisting on the "extremely important and urgent" need to fight

online terrorist activities such as recruitment or mobilization,

while at the same time respecting the right to peaceful assembly and

association of other users. The report mentions the following use

cases that could be help further our reflection:

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- Instances of network shutdowns in the Arab Spring, to prevent

people from organising themselves or assembling

- California's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) shutdown of mobile

phone service, to avoid protester violence and disruption of

service

- The wholesale blocking of Google as a violation of freedom of

expression

- Telus, a telecom company which blocked customers' access to

websites critical of Telus during a Telecommunications Workers

Union strike against it

- The targeting of social media users who call for or organise

protests though the Internet in Turkey's Gezi Park protests

- Mass surveillance or other interferences with privacy in the

context of law enforcement and national security

- Use of VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) to the TOR network to

ensure anonymity

- Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS) as civil

disobedience.

In 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of

peaceful assembly and of association, notes the opportunities

and challenges posed by digital networks to the rights to freedom of

peaceful assembly and of association [UNSRFAA2019]. The report recommends that

international human rights norms and principles should also be used

as a framework "that guides digital technology companies' design,

control and governance of digital technologies". The report states

that "technical standards" in particular can affect the freedom of

association and assembly, and makes some recommendations on which the

following could be relevant to our discussion here:

- "[Undertake] human rights impact assessments which incorporate the

rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association when

developing or modifying their products and services,"

- "increase the quality of participation in and implementation of

existing multi-stakeholder initiatives,"

- "collaborate with governments and civil society to develop

technology that promotes and strengthens human rights,"

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- "support the research and development of appropriate technological

solutions to online harassment, disinformation and propaganda,

including tools to detect and identify State-linked accounts and

bots," and

- "adopt monitoring indicators that include specific concerns

related to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."

In one of their "training kits" [APCtraining], the Association of

Progressive Communications addressed different impacts of the

internet on association and assembly and raised three particular

issues worthy to note here:

1. Organization of protests. Internet and social media are enablers

of protests, such as it was seen in the "Arab Spring". Some of

these protests - like online petitions or campaigns - are similar

to offline association and assembly, but other protest forms are

inherent to the Internet capacity like hacking, DDOS and are

subject to controversy within the Internet community, some people

finding it legitimate, and others not.

2. Surveillance. While the Internet facilitates association, the

association in turn leaves a lot of traces that can be used in

turn for law enforcement but also for repressing political

dissents. As they note, even the threat of surveillance can have

deter facilitation.

3. Anonymity and pseudonymity can be useful protection mechanism for

those who'd like to attend legitimate association without facing

retribution. On the other hand, anonymity can be used to harm

society, such as in online fraud or sexual predation.

Online association and assembly are the starting point of group to

mobilization in modern democracies, and even more so where physical

gatherings have been impossible or dangerous [APC]. Throughout the

world -from the Arab Spring to Latin American student movements and

the #WomensMarch- the Internet has played a crucial role by providing

means for the fast dissemination of information otherwise mediated by

the press, or even forbidden by the government [Pensado]. According

to Hussain and Howard the Internet helped to "build solidarity

networks and identification of collective identities and goals,

extend the range of local coverage to international broadcast

networks" and as platform for contestation for "the future of civil

society and information infrastructure" [HussainHoward]. The IETF

itself, defined as an 'open global community' of network designers,

operators, vendors, and researchers [RFC3233] is also protected by

freedom of assembly and association . Discussions, comments and

consensus around RFCs are possible because of the collective

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expression that freedom of association and assembly allow. The very

word "protocol" found its way into the language of computer

networking based on the need for collective agreement among a group

of assembled network users [HafnerandLyon].

[RFC8280] is a paper by the Human Rights Protocol Consideration

Resarch Group in the Internet Research Taskforce on internet

protocols and human rights that discusses issues of FAA,

specifically:

- The expansion of DNS for generic namespace as an enabler of

association for minorities. The paper argues that specifically

the expansion of the DNS to allow for new generic Top Level

Domains (gTLDs) can have negative impacts on freedom of

association because of restrictive policies by some registries and

registrars, on the other hand could gTLDs also enable communities

to build clearly identifiable spaces for association (such as

.gay).

- The impact of Distributed Denial of Service attacks on freedom of

association. Whereas DDoS has been used as a tool for protest, in

many cases this is infringing on other parties freedom of

expression. Furthermore, often devices (such as IoT devices and

routers) are inscribed in such DDoS attacks whereas the owner or

user did not consent to this. Thus they do not have the

possibility to exit this assembly. Therefore the draft concluded

that that IETF "should try to ensure that their protocols cannot

be used for DDoS attacks"

- The impact of middleboxes on the ability of users to connect to

the Internet and therefore their ability to exercise their right

to freedom of association and assembly. The lack of connectivity

can significantly impact freedom of assembly and association of a

user. Especially if this is done in a way that is not knowable

for the user and if there is no possibility to for the user to

have access to due process to dispute the lack of (secure or

private) connectivity in general or to a specific service.

In June 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human

Rights it is concluded that technologies can be enablers of the exercise of

FAA, but technology is also significantly used to interfere with the

ability of people to exercise their right to freedom of association and

assembly. Specifically, the report mentions network shutdowns, the

usage of technology to surveil or crack down on protesters, leading to human rights violations. This includes

facial recognition technology, and the uses of other ways to violate the (group)

privacy of people engaged in an assembly or association. The report

makes it explicit that companies play a significant role enabling,

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for instance by developing, providing or selling the technology, but

also by directly exercising these violations [UNHCHR2020].

5.3. Specific questions raised from the literature review

Here are some questions raised from the literature review that can

have implications for protocol design:

1. Should protocols be designed to enable legitimate limitations on

association in the interests of "national security or public

safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public

health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of

others", as stated in the ICCPR article 21 [ICCPR]? Where in the

stack do we care for FAA?

2. Can protocols facilitate agency of membership in associations,

assemblies and interactions?

3. What are the features of protocols that enable freedom of

association and assembly?

4. Does protocol development sufficiently consider usable and

accessible formats and technologies appropriate for all persons,

including those with different kinds of disabilities?

5. Can a protocol be designed to legitimately exclude someone from

an association?

In the following sections we attempt to answer these questions with

specific examples of standardized protocols in the IETF.

6. Cases and examples

As the Internet mediates collective action and collaboration, it

impacts on freedom of association and assembly. To answer our

research question regarding how internet architecture enable and/or

inhibits such human right, we researched several independent and

typical cases related to protocols that have been either adopted by

the IETF, or are widely used on the Internet. Our goal is to figure

out whether they facilitate freedom of assembly and association, or

whether they inhibit it through their design or implementation.

We are aware that some of the following examples go beyond the use of

Internet protocols and flow over into the application layer or

examples in the offline world whereas the purpose of the current

document is to break down the relationship between Internet protocols

and the right to freedom of assembly and association. Nonetheless,

we do recognize that in some cases the line between them and

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applications, implementations, policies and offline realities are

often blurred and hard -if not impossible- to differentiate.

We use the literature review to guide our process of inquiry for each

case, and to dive deeper in what can be found interesting about each

case as it relates to freedom of association.

6.1. Got No Peace: Spam and DDoS

Should protocols be designed to enable legitimate limitations on

association in the interests of "national security or public safety,

public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals

or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others", as stated in

the ICCPR article 21 [ICCPR]? Where in the stack do we care for FAA?

The 2020 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human

Rights [UNHCHR2020] described how technology is often used to limit

freedom of assembly and association, such as for instance through

network shutdowns and the surveillance of groups. Because access to

the Internet is crucial not only for freedom of association and

assembly, but also for the right to development, and the right to

freedom of expression and information [Nyokabi], the United Nation

Special Rapporteur argues that:

(b) Avoid resorting to disruptions and shutdowns of Internet or

telecommunications networks at all times and particularly during

assemblies, including those taking place in electoral contexts

and during times of unrest;

Whereas the states have the obligation to protect human rights, there

has been an increasing call for non-state actors, such as companies,

to respect human rights. The UN adopted guiding principles on business and human rights [UNGPBHR] and talks within the HRC are ongoing about an international legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises]. This includes a chain-responsibility

of actors, which means that not just the company's own processes

should not negatively impact human rights, but they should also

engage in due diligence processes, such as human rights impact

assessments. This includes an assessment of whether the products

that are sold, or the services that are provided, can be used to

engage in human rights violations, or whether human rights violations

occur in any stage of the supply chain of the company. If this is

the case, measures should be taken to mitigate this.

In the case of dual-use technologies, this means that technology

could be used for legitimate purposes, but could also be used to

limit freedom of association or assembly, it might mean that

producers or sellers should limit the parties they sell to, or even

better, ensure that the illegitimate use of the technology is not

technically possible anymore, or made more difficult.

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6.1.1. Spam

In the 1990s as the internet became more and more commercial, spam

came to be defined as irrelevant or unsolicited messages that were

posted many times to multiple news groups or mailing lists [Marcus]}.

Here the question of consent, but also harm, are crucial. In the

2000s a large part of the discussion revolved around the fact that

certain corporations, protected by the right to freedom of

association, considered spam to be a form of "commercial speech",

thus encompassed by free expression rights [Marcus]. Yet spam can be

not only a nuisance, but a threat to systems and users.

This leaves us with an interesting case around spam mitigation: spam is currently handled

mostly by mail providers on behalf of the user, next to that

countries are increasingly adopting opt-in regimes for mailing lists

and commercial e-mail, with a possibility of serious fines in case of

violation. Yet many ask: is spam not the equivalent of the fliers and

handbills ever present in our offline world? The big difference

between the proliferation of such messages offline and online is the

scale. It is not hard for a single person to message a lot of

people online, whereas if that person needed to go house by house the scale

and impact of their actions would be much smaller. Inversely if it

were a common practice to expose people to unlimited unwanted messages online,

users would be drowned in such messages, and no expression would be

possible anymore. Allowing illimited sending of unsolicited messages

would be a blow against freedom of speech: when everyone talks,

nobody listens.

Here the argument is very similar to DDoS attacks, considered next:

Legitimate uses of online campaigning, or online protesting, are

drowned out by a malicious use which constitutes an attack on the

internet infrastructure and thus the assembly or association itself.

6.1.2. DDoS

Distributed Denial of Service attacks are leveled against a server or

service by a controller of a host or multiple hosts by overloading

the server or service's bandwidth or resources (volume-based floods)

or exploit protocol behaviours (protocol attacks). DDoS attacks can

thus stifle and complicate the rights to assemble online for media

and human rights organisations whose websites are the target of DDoS.

At the same time there are comparisons made between DDoS attacks and

sit-in protests [Sauter]. However the main distinction is

significant: only a small fragment of "participants" (from

controllers to compromised device owners) in DDoS attacks are aware

or willing [RFC8280]. Notably DDoS attacks are increasingly used to

commit crimes such as extortion, which infringe on others' human

rights.

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Because of the interrelation of technologies, it cannot be said that

there is one point in the technical stack that there are

characteristics of "peaceful" or "non-peaceful" association visible

to protocol developers. As we can see from the cases of spam

blocking and DDoS mitigation that "peaceful or non-peaceful" is not a

meaningful heuristic, or even characteristic, of problematic content.

If anything, their commonality is scale and volume.

6.2. Holistic Agency: Mailing Lists and Spam

Can protocols facilitate agency of membership in associations,

assemblies and interactions?

6.2.1. Mailing lists

Since the beginning of the Internet mailing lists have been a key

site of assembly and association [RFC0155] [RFC1211]. In fact,

mailing lists were one of the Internet's first functionalities

[HafnerandLyon].

In 1971 four years after the invention of email, the first mailing

list was created to talk about the idea of using Arpanet for

discussion. What had initially propelled the Arpanet project forward

as a resource sharing platform was gradually replaced by the idea of

a network as a means of bringing people together [Abbate]. More than

45 years after, mailing lists are pervasive and help communities to

engage, have discussions, share information, ask questions, and build

ties. Even as social media and discussion forums grow, mailing lists

continue to be widely used [AckermannKargerZhang] and are still a

crucial tool to organise groups and individuals around themes and

causes [APC3].

Mailing lists' pervasive use are partly explained because they allow

for "free" association: people subscribe (join) and unsubscribe

(leave) as they please. Mailing lists also allow for association of

specific groups on closed lists. This free association online

enables agency of membership, a key component of freedom of

association and assembly.

6.2.2. Spam

As we mentioned before, there are interesting implications for

freedom of association and assembly when looking at spam mitigation.

Here we want to specifically note that if we consider that the rights

to assembly and association also mean that "no one may be compelled

to belong to an association" [UDHR], spam infringes both rights if an

op-out mechanism is not provided and people are obliged to receive

unwanted information, or be reached by people they do not know.

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6.3. Civics in Cyberspace: Messaging, Conferencing, and Networking

What are the features of protocols that enable freedom of

association and assembly?

Civic participation is often expressed as the freedom to associate

and assemble, along with a whole other set of enabling rights such as

freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Former UN Special

Rapporteur David Kaye established a strong relationship between

technology that allows anonymity and uses encryption have positive

effects on freedom of expression [Kaye]. Here we look at messaging,

such as email, mailing lists and internet relay chat; video

conferencing and peer-to-peer networking protocols to investigate the

common features that enable freedom of association and assembly

online.

6.3.1. Email

Similarly to freedom of expression's enabling and universal right to

impart one's ideas openly, "the right to whisper", or

confidentiality, is the ability to limit to whom one imparts one's

ideas. An encrypted email project, the LEAP Encryption Access

Project, says, "like free speech, the right to whisper is a necessary

precondition for a free society. Without it, civil society

languishes and political freedoms are curtailed. As the importance

of digital communication for civic participation increases, so too

does the importance of the ability to digitally whisper." [LEAP]

6.3.2. Mailing lists

Not only are mailing lists a good example of how protocols can

facilitate the necessary ingredient of agency in freedom of

association, mailing lists are an example of messaging technology

that has other features that enable freedom of association and

assembly.

The archival function of mailing lists allows for posterior

accountability and analysis. The ubiquity and interoperability of

email, and by extension email lists, provides a low barrier to entry

to an inclusive medium.

Association and assembly online can be undermined when right to

privacy is at risk. And one of the downsides of mailing lists are

similar to the privacy and security concerns generally associated

with email. At least with email, end-to-end encryption such as

OpenPGP [RFC4880] and S/MIME [RFC5751] can keep user communications

authenticated and confidential. With mailing lists, this protection

is not as possible because with many lists the final recipients are

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typically too many for . There have been experimental solutions to

address this issue such as Schleuder [Schleuder], but this has not

been standardized or widely deployed.

6.3.3. IRC

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is an application layer protocol that

enables communication in the form of text through a client/server

networking model [RFC2810]. In other words, a chat service. IRC

clients are computer programs that a user can install on their

system. These clients communicate with chat servers to transfer

messages to other clients. Features of IRC include: federated

design, transport encryption, one-to-many routing, creation of topic-

based "channels", and spam or abuse moderation.

For the purposes of civic participation and freedom of association

and assembly in particular it is critical that IRC's federated design

allows many interoperable, yet customisable, instances and basic

assurance of confidentiality through transport encryption. We

investigate the particular aspect of agency in membership through

moderation in the section 'Block Together Now: IRC and Refusals'

below.

6.3.4. WebRTC

Multi-party video conferencing protocols like WebRTC [RFC6176]

[RFC7118] allow for robust, bandwidth-adaptive, wideband and super-

wideband video and audio discussions in groups. 'The WebRTC protocol

was designed to enable responsive real-time communications over the

Internet, and is instrumental in allowing streaming video and

conferencing applications to run in the browser. In order to easily

facilitate direct connections between computers (bypassing the need

for a central server to act as a gatekeeper), WebRTC provides

functionality to automatically collect the local and public IP

addresses of Internet users (ICE or STUN). These functions do not

require consent from the user, and can be instantiated by sites that

a user visits without their awareness. The potential privacy

implications of this aspect of WebRTC are well documented, and

certain browsers have provided options to limit its behavior.'

[AndersonGuarnieri].

Even though some multi-party video conferencing tools facilitate

freedom of assembly and association, their own configuration might

might pose concrete risks for those who use them. One the one hand

WebRTC is providing resilient channels of communications, but on the

other hand it also exposes information about those who are using the

tool which might lead to increased surveillance, identification and

the consequences that might be derived from that. This is especially

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concerning because the usage of a VPN does not protect against the

exposure of IP addresses [Crawford].

The risk of surveillance is also true in an offline space, but this

is generally easy to analyze for the end-user. Security and privacy

expectations of the end-user could be either improved or made

explicit. This in turn would result in a more secure and/or private

exercise of the right to freedom of assembly or association.

6.3.5. Peer-to-peer networking

At the organizational level, peer production is one of the most

relevant innovations from Internet mediated social practices.

According to [Benkler] these networks imply 'open collaborative

innovation and creation, performed by diverse, decentralized groups

organized principally by neither price signals nor organizational

hierarchy, harnessing heterogeneous motivations, and governed and

managed based on principles other than the residual authority of

ownership implemented through contract.' [Benkler].

In his book The Wealth of Networks, [Benkler2] significantly expands

on his definition of commons-based peer production. In his view,

what distinguishes commons-based production is that it doesn't rely

upon or propagate proprietary knowledge: "The inputs and outputs of

the process are shared, freely or conditionally, in an institutional

form that leaves them equally available for all to use as they choose

at their individual discretion." [Benkler2]. To ensure that the

knowledge generated is available for free use, commons-based projects

are often shared under an open license

Peer-to-peer (P2P) is essentially a model of how people interact in

real life because "we deal directly with one another whenever we wish

to" [Vu]. Usually if we need something we ask our peers, who in turn

refer us to other peers. In this sense, the ideal definition of P2P

is that "nodes are able to directly exchange resources and services

between themselves without the need for centralized servers" where

each participating node typically acts both as a server and as a

client [Vu]. [RFC5694] has defined it as peers or nodes that should

be able to communicate directly between themselves without passing

intermediaries, and that the system should be self-organizing and

have decentralized control [RFC5694]. With this in mind, the

ultimate model of P2P is a completely decentralized system, which is

more resistant to speech regulation, immune to single points of

failure and has a higher performance and scalability. Nonetheless,

in practice some P2P systems are supported by centralized servers and

some others have hybrid models where nodes are organized into two

layers: the upper tier servers and the lower tier common nodes [Vu].

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Since the ARPANET project, the original idea behind the Internet was

conceived as what we would now call a peer-to-peer system [RFC0001].

Over time it has increasingly shifted towards a client/server model

with "millions of consumer clients communicating with a relatively

privileged set of servers" [NelsonHedlun].

Whether for resource sharing or data sharing, P2P systems are

enabling freedom of assembly and association. Not only do they allow

for effective dissemination of information, but they leverage

computing resources by diminishing costs allowing for the formation

of open collectives at the network level. At the same time, in

completely decentralized systems the nodes are autonomous and can

join or leave the network as they want -a characteristic that makes

the system unpredictable: a resource might be only sometimes

available, and some other resources might be missing or incomplete

[Vu]. Lack of information might in turn makes association or

assembly more difficult.

Additionally, when architecturally assessing the role of P2P systems

we could say that: "the main advantage of centralized P2P systems is

that they are able to provide a quick and reliable resource locating.

Their limitation, however, is that the scalability of the systems is

affected by the use of servers. While decentralized P2P systems are

better than centralized P2P systems in this aspect, they require a

longer time in resource locating. As a result, hybrid P2P systems

have been introduced to take advantage of both centralized and

decentralized architectures. Basically, to maintain the scalability,

similar to decentralized P2P systems, there are no servers in hybrid

P2P systems. However, peer nodes that are more powerful than others

can be selected to act as servers to serve others. These nodes are

often called super peers. In this way, resource locating can be done

by both decentralized search techniques and centralized search

techniques (asking super peers), and hence the systems benefit from

the search techniques of centralized P2P systems." [Vu].

6.4. Universal Access: The Web

Does protocol development sufficiently consider usable and accessible

formats and technologies appropriate for persons with different kinds

of disabilities?

The W3C has done significant work to ensure that the Web is

accessible to people with diverse physical abilities [W3C]. The

implementation of these accessibility standards for instance help

people who have issues with seeing or rendering images to

understand what the image actually contains.

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The IETF uses English as its primary working language, both in its

documentation and in its communication. This is also the case for

reference implementations. Whereas it is estimated that roughly 20%

of the Earth's population speaks English, whereas only 360 million

speak English as their first language. [RFC2277] describes that

'"Internationalization is for humans. This means that protocols are

not subject to internationalization; text strings are.", this implies

that protocol developers, as well as people that work with protocols,

are not people, or that protocol developers are all in command of the

English language. This means that it is significantly easier for

people who have a command of the English language to become a

protocol developer - and it might lead to the development of separate

protocols that are developed within large language communities that

are not using the English language or the Latin script. This makes

it harder for people who seek to shape their own space of association

and assembly on the Internet to do so. And is thus driving these

communities into, often proprietary and non-interoperable services

such as Facebook.

When Ramsey Nasser developed the Arabic programming language

&#1602;&#1604;&#1576; (transliterated Qalb, Qlb and Alb) [Nasser] he

called it 'engineering performance art' instead of engineering,

because he knew that his language would not work. In part this is

because all modern programming tools are based on the ASCII character

set, which encodes Latin Characters and was originally based on the

English Language. This highlights cultural biases of computer

science and engineering. Despite long significant efforts, it is

still largely impossible to register an email address in a language

such as Devanagari, Arabic, or Chinese. Even if it is possible - it

is to be expected that there will be a significant failure rate in

sending and receiving emails with other services. This makes it

harder for people who do not speak English and/or don't use the

written Latin script to exercise their freedom of association and

assembly.

6.5. Block Together Now: IRC and Refusals

Can a protocol be designed to legitimately exclude someone

from an association?

Previously we spoke about the privacy protecting features of IRC that

enable freedom of association and assembly, including transport

security. But now we turn to the ability to block users and

effectively moderate discussions on IRC as a key feature of the

technology that enables agency in membership, a key aspect of freedom

of association and assembly.

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For order to be kept within the IRC network, special classes of users

become "operators" and are allowed to perform general maintenance

functions on the network: basic network tasks such as disconnecting

(temporary or permanently) and reconnecting servers as needed

[RFC2812]. One of the most controversial power of operators is the

ability to remove a user from the connected network by 'force', i.e.,

operators are able to close the connection between any client and

server [RFC2812].

IRC servers may deploy different policies for the ability of users to

create their own channels or 'rooms', and for the delegation of

'operator'-rights in such spaces. Some IRC servers support SSL/TLS

connections for security purposes [RFC7194] which helps stop the use

of packet sniffer programs to obtain the passwords of IRC users, but

has little use beyond this scope due to the public nature of IRC

channels. TLS connections require both client and server support

(that may require the user to install TLS binaries and IRC client

specific patches or modules on their computers). Some networks also

use TLS for server to server connections, and provide a special

channel flag (such as +S) to only allow TLS-connected users on the

channel, while disallowing operator identification in clear text, to

better utilize the advantages that TLS provides.

7. Conclusions: Can we learn anything from the previous case studies?

Communities, collaboration and joint action lie at the heart of the

Internet. Even at a linguistic level, the words "networks" and

"associations" are closely related. Both are groups and assemblies

of people who depend on "links" and "relationships" [Swire]. Taking

legal definitions given in international human rights law and related normative documents

, we could assert that the rights to freedom of assembly

and association protect collective activity online. These rights protect gatherings by persons for a specific purpose and groups with a defined aim over time for a variety of peaceful, expressive and non-expressive, purposes,. voluntary and uncoerced.

Given that the Internet itself was originally designed as a medium of

communication for machines that share resources with each other as

equals [RFC0903], the Internet is now one of the most basic

infrastructures for the rights to freedom of assembly and association.

Since Internet protocols and the Internet architecture play a central

role in the management, development and use of the Internet, we

established the relation between some protocols and the right to

freedom of assembly and association.

After reviewing several cases representative of FAA considerations

inherent in protocols standardized at the IETF, we can conclude that

the way in which infrastructure is designed and implemented impacts

people's ability to exercise their freedom of assembly and

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association. This is because different technical designs come with

different properties and characteristics. These properties and

characteristics on the one hand enable people to assemble and

associate, but on the other hand also add limiting, or even

potentially endangering, characteristics. More often than not, this

depends on the context. A clearly identified group for open

communications, where messages are sent in cleartext and where

peoples persistent identities are visible, can help to facilitate an

assembly and build trust, but in other contexts the same

configuration could pose a significant danger. Endangering

characteristics should be mitigated, or at least clearly communicated

to the users of these technologies.

Lastly, the increasing shift towards closed and non-interoperable

platforms in chat and social media networks have a significant impact

on the distributed and open nature of the Internet. Often these non-

interoperable platforms are built on open-protocols but do not allow

for interoperability or data-portability. The use of social-media

platforms has enabled groups to associate, but it has also rendered

users unable to change platforms, therefore leading to a sort of

"forced association" that inhibits people to fully exercise their

freedom of assembly and association.

8. Acknowledgements

- Fred Baker, Jefsey, and Andrew Sullivan for work on Internet

definitions.

- Stephane Bortzmeyer for several concrete text suggestions that

found their way in this document (such as the AS filtering

example).

- Mark Perkins and Gurshabad for finding a lot of typos.

- Gurshabad Grover and an anonymous reviewer for a full review.

- The hrpc mailinglist at large for a very constructive discussion

on a hard topic.

9. Security Considerations

As this draft concerns a research document, there are no security

considerations.

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10. IANA Considerations

This document has no actions for IANA.

11. Research Group Information

The discussion list for the IRTF Human Rights Protocol Considerations

Research Group is located at the e-mail address hrpc@ietf.org [1].

Information on the group and information on how to subscribe to the

list is at https://www.irtf.org/mailman/listinfo/hrpc [2]

Archives of the list can be found at: https://www.irtf.org/mail-

archive/web/hrpc/current/index.html [3]

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