

We Learn to Stick Our Necks Out

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Abstract

Minciu Sodas is an open laboratory serving and organizing independent thinkers. Since 1998, the lab has grown to 100 active and 1,000 supportive participants. This paper documents the lab's dynamics by which it fosters the growth of independent thinkers as leaders. This growth is observed to unfold through distinct stages. We present a giraffe scale of the degree to which an individual is willing to stick their neck out as an independent thinker. Individuals grow in their disposition to challenge themselves and then help others challenge themselves as well. Working openly is key to standing up to the world. Useful social networking tools include gateway groups, personal archives, profiles for projects, tools for organizing thoughts, one-on-one chats, working groups, wiki spaces, galleries, sorting piles and glossaries. This is related to the challenge of working openly at an academic institution serving 50,000 students.

Introduction

The Minciu Sodas laboratory serves and organizes independent thinkers. The founder of Minciu Sodas, and the author of this paper, has worked since 1998 to bring together and hold together the widest variety of independent thinkers. Minciu Sodas hosts many projects, and in particular, has contributed to the development of software tools for organizing thoughts, business models for an open economy, an ethical public domain, community currencies, global villages, peer-to-peer social networking systems, social protocols, integration of the marginalized, interfaith dialogue, conceptual frameworks and leadership development. [1]

In this last year, the laboratory has grown to 100 active and 1,000 participants from around the world, notably Lithuania, the United States of America, Austria, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Tamil diaspora, Australia, Belgium, France, Kenya, the Canary Islands, Indonesia, India, Tanzania, Thailand, Italy, Iran, Germany, Slovenia, Bosnia and Ireland.

Recently, the author was approached with the idea of organizing the open work of a major academic institution serving 50,000 students. This paper presents his review of the principles at work in the laboratory, especially as organized around leadership development. In this first person account, he describes the relevance of online systems at various stages of the unfolding of an independent thinker. He considers how these systems might be pulled together as a peer-to-peer social networking system. He notes the scale of activity that might be expected in organizing this all for a large academic institution.

Independent Thinkers

Our wish is that independent thinkers might leverage our community. Our concern therefore is to foster them as leaders.

Generally, independent thinkers find themselves in the periphery, away from the center. That is because the center is defined by those who are quick to accommodate each other without genuine agreement.

Appreciating this, how might we design a system where our energy is pointed out towards our leaders, those independent thinkers who present clear, mature, accountable, well developed alternatives to mainstream thinking? By highlighting their initiative, we shift attention to many points on the periphery, and open up space for more and more leaders, so that all of us might act as leaders. We disintegrate our world as we know it.

Our networking system, as I imagine it, is defined by our wish to foster leadership by independent thinkers. My experience is that we choose how fully we wish to develop as independent thinkers. We might say there is a "giraffe scale" of how high we stick out our necks. The Giraffe Heroes

Project makes use of just such a metaphor.[2] In talking with people, I observe degrees to which we dare to stand as individuals:

- *A discussion group for independent thinkers? Yes, that sounds interesting, please sign me up.*
- *I value independent thinkers, I think we need more of them.*
- *Yes, I like to think of myself as an independent thinker, and I am glad to voice my opinion as needed.*
- *Yes, I actually jot down my thoughts and sort through them and have some techniques for developing my ideas, and I can share my personal experience.*
- *Yes, I want to get things done, and I'm glad when I can add momentum for anybody's project as needed.*
- *Yes, I want to know myself, and I appreciate all the help that I can get so that I might grow as a person.*
- *Yes, I'm able and willing to say what concept of all is deepest in my life.*
- *Yes, I love challenging myself as directly as possible with questions that I don't know the answer to but will work to answer.*
- *Yes, I will challenge others to grow so that we might engage each other as equals because I would like their help in challenging myself.*
- *Yes, I reach out to every person and try to understand where they are at, and support them in their growth as an independent thinker, and that helps me be active and grow wise and complete on all levels.*
- *Yes, I make a special effort to seek out and connect with the people who are most different from me and others I know, so that we might bring together the widest variety of outlooks, and be able to truly show that deep inside we are the same.*
- *Yes, I reject this world, and I turn to an absolute vantage point which you may call God that is greater than I and this world in every way. I engage this vantage point so that I may be excellent at tuning in to it, listening for it, and most importantly, listening to it, so that I might be quick to step beyond myself, protect others from my own meddling and be able to lead for us all.*

I think we all have voices inside that whisper such thoughts. Unfortunately, we live in a world that is ultimately crushing. It's a great struggle to not get

categorized into all kinds of boxes. Typically, we're forced to hush up our dreams, sweep them under the rug, suppress them, throw them away. We're pushed to believe that, like turtles, we must hide our heads safe within our shells. Some of us, however, have managed to stick our necks out quite far, and openly be ourselves. What we live openly is what we can suppose, what we can stand on. This is how we win our own reality. That is why *working openly* is so important for independent thinkers.

Working openly, our lab is a space that is an equal to the world, an alternative to it, and perhaps some day a replacement for it. We're able to say and do openly whatever we need to. Also, working openly, we're accountable for what we're getting done and how we're growing. So there's not much point in stirring up others if we can't explain our own values, or challenging others if we can't challenge ourselves. By working openly we're all able to acknowledge where we are - how far we're sticking our necks out now - and how farther we'd like to go. We're also very grateful to have leaders who encourage us by their example and show just how normal we are. [3]

A Peer-to-Peer Social Networking System

What general principles might guide in the design of a system for working openly and working-in-parallel? Such a system should, as much as possible, operate as a network of equals, unfold as individuals unfold, include those with marginal Internet connectivity, make innovative use of commonplace technology, and assume that content is in the Public Domain except where it notes otherwise.

We're fostering leaders, and so in our system, each participant needs to stand alone, however modestly. That is why our laboratory is developing a *peer-to-peer* social networking system. A peer-to-peer system is one in which each participant can exist on their own and engage others as needed rather than be subject to the control of a centralized system. Each of us should be able, as much as possible, to host and maintain our own part of the system. Our goal is that we each develop effective presences as online leaders. As independent thinkers, our priority is to be who we are, and be found and integrated by anybody who might care, rather than to try to search and guess

who such people might be. We don't organize others except as it's relevant for our own individual growth. However, we expect that for each of us, what starts out as a web page will grow into a community that overlaps with many others. [4]

We're focusing on our own work with our own thoughts, and so it makes sense that we can do as much as possible offline. This is also very relevant, for example, in Africa, where we have participants who spend as much as \$3 per hour and \$300 per month on Internet access. [5]

We want to each stay independent. We don't want to lock ourselves into systems hosted by our lab or by others. We also want to participate as simply as possible, and invest ourselves as little as we can in the technology. This suggests that our system make good use of the humblest existing technologies such as home made HTML pages, some extra tags, and RSS feeds. Certainly, there can be services that simplify the creation of such pages, or host them, but the system should function without depending on them.

Because we're working openly, it's essential that our functionality declare and assume, by default, that content is in the Public Domain except as noted otherwise, as at the Ethical Public Domain. This will also help with our content flows. And wherever possible we want to allow participation without registering or logging in. [6][7]

Web Functionality that Fosters Thinkers

I list below a variety of web functionality that I think mirrors our growth as independent thinkers. Let us consider what this might mean should we serve 50,000 students. Please read this primarily as a vision, as not all of this activity is real at this point.

Monthly newsletter - I hope that all of the students will have email. We would want to send out a monthly newsletter to all of the students to alert them to how they can participate.

Gateways - At our lab we have all-purpose discussion groups in different languages that are set up to introduce people to our work. These are the groups that I sign people up for so as to introduce them to our lab. We keep the traffic to

an average of 5 letters per day or less. Typically, we need several hundred people. I imagine that 10% of the students might join, so we would want to set up 5 to 10 gateways in various languages, and for various institutes or regions. It can take several months for a person to feel ready to participate.

Personal archives - Once a person starts to write letters or make posts somewhere on the web, then it is good if their writings can be found in one place. I imagine that they can have an HTML page that uses primitive mark up ("extensions" of HTML) such as <name>Andrius Kulikauskas</name> and <rss>http://rss.groups.yahoo.com/group/minciu_sodas_en/rss</rss> or <group>minciu_sodas_EN@yahoogroups.com</group>. Such pages can be generated and hosted with the help of an online wizard, or they can be created by hand. This page would be registered or found and then any community to which the person belonged might monitor the relevant RSS feeds or mailing lists or wikis or websites, store the contents in their database, perhaps also spidering the relevant pages, identify the person's contributions, merge all of the letters and postings for that person, and generate for them: a news feed with links to their latest postings, an online database which they can search, and an archive which they can download. In other words, by just maintaining a list of venues, they are able to get the equivalent of a website & blog & RSSfeed & database & archive. The community offers this as a free service because the content is in the Public Domain and it can draw on all of it in fostering connections. For example, the community is able to map out who participates at which venues. Furthermore, for free or for a fee they are able to set up a list of feeds, websites, etc. that they want to monitor for changes, and this information they can reviewed or downloaded as needed and read offline at their leisure. This is the start of an independent thinker's web presence - to encourage them to post their thoughts, and to archive them. Typically, 10% of our subscribers are active participants, so we might expect 500 such.

Profile for Projects - Once an independent thinker has a "face" and has practice participating online, then they are ready to engage responsibly in all manner of projects. This is done by adding more tags to their web page, for example

<skills>,<wants>,<thanks>,<praise>,<contact>, etc. Again, this can be done by hand or, more typically, by making use of a wizard. These are generally excerpts (paragraphs), often based on letters or postings. Note that they are not atomic, so for example, <contact> might include all contact information, or <skills> might include all programming languages known - searches for Python programmers will return the entire excerpt. There is a form for publishing the excerpts or posting new text, and categorizing them (adding the tags). This information is kept on the one page, but as it grows, it can expand into additional pages. The page is monitored by the various communities to which the individual belongs (membership is also given by tags and reciprocal linking). The tag information is stored in a database and is presented as RSS feeds that can be aggregated as needed. This is the information that is relevant for global online and local offline community currencies. People will naturally participate in several communities. A community can facilitate discovery amongst its own participants and also reach out to share information with other communities, especially as this is public information. We share information about how people may be approached, for example, their interest in physically meeting up, and schedule topics for discussion at web chat channels (and send out invitations). Note also (if email becomes a problem) that email contacts can be replaced by not posting emails but instead pointing to channels (such as forms, groups) for making initial engagements. The purpose here is for independent thinkers to grow in applying their principles by participating in a large number of small projects. This might be 250 students on whom we would focus our energies as networkers to facilitate working together.

Notebook - The independent thinker then looks deeper into their own values and also comprehensively, so as to take an interest in all subjects and not overlook anything fundamental. It is at this point that collecting URLs and organizing notes starts to have meaning as a reflection of a person's sorting out their values and showing the workings of their soul. The excerpts from above, and those created upon collecting URLs, can be organized using a tool like Lucid. Similarly, RSS feeds can be organized, generated and aggregated using such a tool. This notebook makes it straightforward to monitor and engage a thinker.

Dialogues - The independent thinker is interested to know themselves, find themselves. This might be 100 students. They accept help from others, emulate good examples, seek absolutes, principles, an absolute vantage point. We have tools for engaging them and each other. These include one-on-one chats for which we save and share the transcripts. We also have one-on-one phone conversations and conference calls which we tape and share through an Internet radio channel (through archive.org) These are the key people that we invest ourselves in. We invite them to participate at Open Leader Biz in our work-on-tap programs so that they have work for themselves as needed (typically 10 hours per week). This is where we generate our income - up to 100 x \$10,000 equals \$1,000,000 per year in wages for the students - and presumably that means another \$1,000,000 per year in high paying work and mark up for our network's leaders. Note that we don't charge for education - we offer free education - and the institutes don't take a cut - we have free relationships with the students - and they have self-selected themselves, we do not turn anyone away. Such promising students may very well stay in our network, in one way or another, for their entire lives. These are the "independent thinking" students who have demonstrated that they "work for free" to help various projects, and who, without us, might be frustrated, discouraged, depressed, crushed, warped, stunted. Also, the primary contacts here would each be positioned to earn, I imagine, \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year depending on our roles. [8][9]

Working Groups - The independent thinker recognizes the key concept that they have found for themselves at the heart of all others. It is the concept that most completely expresses all of their concerns in life. It is the window onto their soul. They foster their intuition by living this concept. We help them name and brand this concept. Ultimately, we organize a working group for them around their concept where they can grow as a leader, an investigator. But first we may have their activity be hosted at an existing working group so that they might build relationships with others, develop as an investigator, and build critical mass for their projects. They also set up a set of RSS feeds that reflect their key concept and the information they monitor for that (and others might to learn about it).

Wiki Spaces - The independent thinker grows as an Investigatorius by investigating a question which clarifies their key concept in some way. It should be one for which they don't know the answer, but intend to discover, perhaps in six months to two years. We set up a wiki space within one of our wikis so that they might develop their world view and pursue their investigations. The leader for that wiki helps them grow as an investigator. The wiki space is intimately connected to their transLucid tool for organizing excerpts and also to their RSS feeds, etc. Special databases are developed as needed for collecting examples, patterns and relating them to other databases, such as the sets of strategies, problems, values collected by the Union of International Associations. We might have 50 investigations. [10][11]

Galleries - The independent thinker who reaches out to others can lead and organize a gallery space that showcases the many individuals, groups and projects that circle around their core concept.

Sorting Piles - The independent thinker who reaches out, coaches and mentors others is generally overworked. The load on them is too large. So the thought is to have a way for them to offload the incoming requests they receive. We would set up sorting piles for each of our working groups (based on key concepts). Then they would be served by global teams that would have secretarial authority to go through the piles and respond. The team members would thereby grow in connections and experience and would receive typically community currency. They would also build their brand (for example, One Village might have teams) and the tasks would be noted, leaving a record that could be shown to current or potential funders. This will also relate back to the Profiles for Projects. In responding, the team members would encourage the private correspondents to participate publicly, especially through the working groups. Meanwhile, the leader would be free to spend more energy as a mentor and Direktorius, helping the team members grow as Investigatorius. I would like to set this system up for Janet Feldman of ActAlive, Franz Nahrada of GIVE and Global Villages, Kerry Santo of Modo Fac Central and others. Perhaps we will find 5 or 10 students who are exceptional leaders and might play such a role. [12][13][14]

Glossaries - The independent thinker, in rooting themselves in a greater perspective, will want to write out a glossary of their private language. This helps them open up and make clear the language by which they interpret their understanding of the Absolute. In time, it makes sense to keep relating such glossaries as self-checks on one's thinking.

This is quite a wide system and there is a lot left to specify. But much of it can be built with quite humble technology. My strategy is to focus on the needs of our key people such as Franz Nahrada and Janet Feldman and multiply their effectiveness by spreading out their load and involving so many more of us in the important work that comes to them. In a similar pattern, our leaders who find large work projects will be able to share paid work.

I think that many aspects and the general outlook is quite novel. However, it's certainly helpful to consider what technologies are available, what initiatives are compatible, and who might be interested in working together. It's very exciting to consider how CivicSpace might be adapted to serve many of our needs, and especially, how it might serve as a "community name server" for interacting with pages distributed across the web. [15]

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