

Decentralized Web
webinar series by



Resource guide

session 06

Ethics of the Decentralized Web and Humanitarian Work

by Aditi Shah

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Is decentralization the answer?

Some call it Web3, others rally behind a DWeb, but there is no denying that we are on the cusp of a radical shift in the structure and experiences that make up the internet. As we continue to imagine and build a decentralized web, many are asking: how much of the old system are we willing to leave behind?

Today, the internet both produces and is a product of the social and economic dynamics that structure the world. As our current web has evolved, we've witnessed massive power and control concentrated in the hands of a few dominant platforms. So what do our new decentralized technologies bring to the table, and what conditions could they help change? Mai Ishikawa Sutton asks:

“What matters in this discussion – in any discussion over a technology really – is who’s designing it, who controls it, and who stands to benefit?”

Where do we begin?

While centralized projects reflect the values of their founders and a concentrated minority of stakeholders (executive staff, board members, and shareholders), decentralized projects have the potential to challenge such conventions.

The large majority of decentralized tech is open source, and thus must answer, ultimately, to a community of builders and practitioners. Others believe it is possible to write our values into the code of blockchains themselves. Values such as privacy, security, verifiability, and self-sovereign control of data. But we can't leave it to the engineers to guarantee ethical systems.

Some key questions for everyone:

When building a decentralized web, how do we make ethical considerations part of an ongoing process? What are the shared values around which we center our projects? Once we have a set of ethics, how do we enforce them? How do we consider the needs of those who belong to marginalized communities?

For the global DWeb community, it took a year-long process to assemble these guiding principles. In our shared vision, values like distributed benefits and mutual respect take center stage. The evolving nature of these principles makes it a living document that does not try to define the future, but acts as inspiration for it.

Encoding rights and rules

Blockchains already have certain rules and rights encoded into them. Now is the time to explore how to expand the set of rights built into these technologies and the way they are used. The shortcomings of existing state systems and centralized technologies, for instance, can prove useful in this regard. [Nathan Schneider](#) calls for encoding human rights into our decentralized protocols:

“If designers recognize the need for inscribing human rights into blockchains – or are forced to do it – the same crypto tools presently being used to bypass the international order could instead become the means of architecting a better one. Blockchains could enforce labor rights, incentivize decarbonization, and impose targeted sanctions. They could establish fair, context-aware due process. Rather than relying on military power, these systems would exploit the increasingly widespread dependence on digital networks to enforce people’s rights. Such systems could someday defeat military powers without firing a shot.”

At the end of the day, decentralization cannot be our end goal. Decentralization is just one of many approaches to building alternative networks. For some, it means building extractive [bitcoin mining farms](#), while others focus their efforts on [community-owned mesh networks](#) for communities off-the-grid. Like all technologies, decentralized tools can be used to hurt or help humanity.

Even today, ethically-minded humanitarian organizations are using decentralized tools to help communities around the world. As people

understandably decry NFTs and cryptocurrency speculation, it's important to see the bigger picture. Decentralized technologies are here to stay. How they grow and evolve depends on us. So it's up to each of us to call for technology better suited to our needs, ruled by power structures incentivized to protect all communities, especially those at the margins.

Recommended Resources

[The Debate Over DWeb vs. Web3 & The Decentralized Elephant in the Room](#),
by Mai Ishikawa Sutton, Dripline, 2022

[How Can we Encode Human Rights into the Blockchain?](#) by Nathan Schneider, in Noema

[Other Networks: Taeyoon Choi on Infrastructure and Equity on the Decentralized Web](#),
by Taeyoon Choi, Deem Journal

[Distribute Commons, Not Commodities](#),
by Nathan Schneider, Internet Archive blog, 2021

[Uncivilizing Digital Territories](#),
by Luando Vieira, in COMPOST Mag, 2021

[The Sacred Geometry of Respect, Trust, and Equity](#), by Coraline Ada Ehmke, Internet Archive blog, 2021

[Ecological Awareness for the Decentralized Web](#),
by Kelsey Breseman, Internet Archive blog, 2021

[What to get right first](#), by Rebecca MacKinnon, Starling Lab

Dive Deeper

From the Bottom to the Top: Mai Ishikawa Sutton on the Decentralized Web, interview with Mai Ishikawa Sutton, Logic Magazine, 2021

The Web3 Decentralization Debate Is Focused on the Wrong Question, by Divya Siddarth, Danielle Allen, and E. Glen Weyl, WIRED, 2022

Unpacking the Myth of Web3: Decentralization of What? by Alice Yuan Zhang

Try it out!

Kernel – a peer-to-peer learning community.

Mapeo – a free toolkit to document and map the data in your surroundings.

Community Rule – a governance toolkit for great communities

Earthdefender's Toolkit – resources and tools for communities on the frontlines of the struggle to defend critical ecosystems around the world.

Community Resources

[GetDWeb.net](#) - website of the DWeb Community, a global network of meetup groups working to build a better web, following these [core principles](#)

[Redigest](#) - Monthly newsletter by [Redecentralize.org](#)

Check out our [other Resource Guides](#) for this series

[Stories from the Decentralized Web](#) - Medium Channel with event recaps, articles & reposts of fundamentals of the Decentralized Web

[DWeb Community Calendar](#)

[Community Rules](#) - 9 simple templates for forming great communities

You can find links to other great information resources on the [DWeb website!](#)

Past and upcoming webinar sessions

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- Apr 28 **Goodbye Facebook, Hello Decentralized
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