

# COMMUNICATION PROCESS TO EMPOWER YOUTH DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP IN THE ESAN TOOM HOME NETWORK

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper aimed to study the implementation of a participatory communication process that empowers digital citizenship, as well as investigating the effects of the digital citizenship process on youths in the northeast region of Thailand. A mixed-methods research approach was used. The sample comprised a total of 40 young people involved in the Esan Toom Home Project. The findings revealed that the process of participatory communication helped in fostering digital citizenship among youths in the northeast region, consisting specifically of (1) improving the digital citizenship capacity of youth volunteers, whose roles involved initiating ideas, creating, performing, or engaging in the communication process, and production of media or innovative ideas that were responsive to the community context; (2) fostering participation in the communication process, in which youth volunteers were involved in formulating, designing, and deciding the form of communication; (3) producing creative media or innovative ideas that resulted from the engagement of youth volunteers and which were tailored to the local context; (4) incorporation of knowledge and concepts throughout the operation of the process, and (5) the support and engagement of networks at both the local and national levels. The digital citizenship process for youth in the northeast region has a positive effect on four areas, namely, (1) youth volunteers, (2) children and young people participating in the program, (3) communities and residents, and (4) policies.

**Keywords:** Participatory communication; digital citizenship; empowerment of youth; media information for digital literacy; communication process

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the development of communication technology has led society into an era of digital media convergence, causing changes in the media landscape. These changes have in turn contributed to changing communication behaviors among youths, particularly in the areas of knowledge exchange, communication, and receipt of information in everyday life. As citizens of democratic societies, youths need to have access to reliable and diverse information which they can use in the process of thinking, analyzing, making decisions, and acting appropriately in a digital society (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2010). As a result, digital citizenship has been broadly discussed and promoted among youths in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, along with digital media literacy. Through these concepts, youths can utilize creative media to benefit themselves, others, and their society (Weerakunthewan, 2018).

The term 'digital citizen' refers to individuals with the ability to comprehend and use digital resources to interact with people from all over the world in an appropriate and creative way, as well as embracing ethics and morality in the use of digital media for both personal and social development (Mike, 2011).

A number of studies on digital citizenship have indicated that the concept should be made part of the curriculum and instruction in schools and other educational institutions, in order to teach students about their digital responsibilities and rights, as well as the security of digital transactions (Ribble and Bailey, 2011). Additionally, numerous studies on media have made use of guidelines related to digital citizenship when deciding on the topics to be included in educational curricula, e.g., internet security, privacy and safety maintenance; relationships and communication; online bullying; digital tracking; maintaining fame, image and identity; information literacy; and respect for other people's creative ideas and copyright (Vega and Robb, 2019). Therefore, it is safe to say that the trend of digital citizenship development in schools has gravitated towards civil responsibility, social vigilance, digital security, prevention of online bullying, and internet etiquette. Lynn Mitchell has mentioned some other things that should be taken into account in terms of studying youth digital citizenship, such as political identity and democratic participation in the digital arena, to benefit youths in a way that allows them to express the various aspects of their identity through digital technology, while also allowing their power to be recognized (Mitchell, 2016). In short, support for youth power in digital contexts is a great way to encourage young people to become more interested in digital citizenship (Loader et al., 2014).

In various countries, extensive work has been done in both educational institutions and in social scenarios to support the development of youth digital citizenship skills. In Thailand, increasing youth digital citizenship can be found in the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (Ministry of Education, 2008), particularly in the section entitled Capacity 5: Technological Application. In effect, students are expected to be able to use technology to enhance their learning, communication, and problem-solving skills in an appropriate, creative, and ethical way. No effort has yet been made to encourage youths to become leaders or creators of activities to self-develop digital citizenship skills, according to the learning content and standards specified in the Career and Technology Strand (Damrongkiattisak, 2015). This study, therefore, aimed to analyze the possibility of encouraging youth digital citizenship, in the hope that it will provide some practical guidelines for the development of relevant skills as a result of collaboration between youths, communities, and networks. This means young people get involved in decision making and contribute to their communities as much as possible.

The purposes of this research are (1) to study the mechanisms that empower digital citizenship for young people, (2) to investigate the impact of the digital citizenship process on young people in the northeast region of Thailand, and (3) to analyze the possibility of empowering digital citizenship for young people, as well as developing extra-curricular suggestions and guidelines for developing digital citizenship skills among youths. This extra-curricular framework will involve not only the agencies responsible for educating youths, but also other parties who are interested in youth development. The rest of this paper will present related concepts, theories, and research, as well as the research methodology, study results, and conclusion and discussion.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses concepts, theories, and research related to the concept of digital citizenship, participatory communication, media information digital literacy, and media and innovation development, as well as youth empowerment.

### 2.1 The concept of participatory communication

Participatory communication refers to a form of communication in which an individual or a group of people in the community is given a chance to be involved in the design of the communication process, from the beginning of the process to the end. The heart of the participatory process lies in mutual thinking, listening, respecting the ideas of others, recognizing others' rights and responsibilities as members of the community, analyzing social problems, and exchanging information with one another (Servaes, 1996; Melkote and Steeves, 2001). Similarly, youth participatory communication can be defined as the process in which children and youths actively engage in generating ideas, as well as designing and inventing media or innovative ideas in response to the community context (Lindström, 2010). Youth participatory communication may likewise relate to self-actualization; the development of life skills; and the ability to live with others in the age of digital information and technology, in a democratic society, and in a multicultural society—all of which are qualities of democratic citizenship, in which literacy in informatics and digital technology are helpful assets (Abs and Veldhuis, 2006; Singhal and Stapitanond, 1996).

## 2.2 The concept of digital citizenship

Digital citizenship is defined by scholars in various ways. The concept of digital citizenship has continually been studied and employed in numerous development projects. In summary, digital citizenship can be defined as when individuals understand and use digital media in an appropriate creative and ethical manner, and they maintain ethics when using digital media for personal and social development (Mike, 2011). The four important features of digital citizenship are: (1) Protection of authenticity and personal data: a digital citizen is aware of digital equality, protecting the security of one's own data and those of others, and the management of data risks in digital media; (2) Activities in digital society: the ability to handle online transactions, use the internet as a bridge to political, economic and social involvement, and build relationships with other members of the digital society so that everyone can live together happily; (3) Skills and knowledge in the digital environment: the ability to access, use, create, evaluate, synthesize, and communicate information via digital devices; (4) Digital ethics: knowledge about computer-related laws and cybercrime, technology ethics and values, copyright and respect for intellectual property, protection of self and the community, and digital responsibility (Mike, 2011; Ribble and Bailey, 2004; Ribble and Bailey, 2011). All the features mentioned above are collaboratively constructed by youths, local residents, and related networks. The vital tool here is providing a platform for youths, so that their decision-making skills and digital involvement are fostered as a result of literacy in media, informatics, and digital technology, as well as the production of digital media infused with community stories.

## 2.3 The concept of media information digital literacy

In a democratic society, access to media, information, and digital technology is considered a basic civil and human right. Media information digital literacy is an important attribute of citizens in democratic societies. The three attributes of citizens in a democratic society are: (1) Responsible citizens, who are honest and responsible, and abide by the law and social norms; (2) Participatory citizens, who participate and lead the organization of social systems and structure; (3) Justice-oriented citizens, who ask questions about social injustices and change the current system and structure to promote social justice (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Westheimer, 2015).

The access to, understanding, and use of media, information, and digital technology are important tools that citizens use to protect their basic rights. Moreover, they are also used by citizens to effect changes in societies where people live together based on justice by expressing their opinions, investigating, and negotiating with governments, capitalists, and the media industry (Martin, 2006).

The definition of media literacy is the capacity to use different media, analyze and understand the forms of media and techniques that the media uses to cause effects on the audience, as well as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and develop different forms of media (Mihailidis, 2014; Jolls and Thoman, 2008).

The definition of information literacy is the ability to evaluate, use, and effectively communicate information in many forms, as well as the ability to understand the ethical meaning of such information (Bawden, 2001; 2008).

The definition of digital literacy is the ability to use digital technology, communication devices, and various networks to search for information (access), process information (understand), and create information (adapt), in many forms (Belshaw, 2012; Hague and Williamson, 2009).

## 2.4 The concept of youth empowerment

The three main concepts related to youth empowerment include empowerment and power (focusing on the direction in which power is used); empowerment and engagement (the level of engagement that influences the degree of empowerment, i.e., serving as a tool to upgrade the level of empowerment); empowerment and education (involving processes such as learning and education in order to facilitate access to information sources, as well as awareness of what is around). Researchers have further explained a key feature of the process of youth empowerment, namely, that it exists in various dimensions, such as personal growth and happiness, relationships, education, politics, social trends, and the freedom to take action and make decisions without being controlled (Martínez et al., 2017).

Empowering strength within youths can be achieved when they get involved in the operation of the community. This process should be adjustable so that children and youths are given more opportunities to take part in society (Tsekoura, 2016). Promoting the involvement of children and youths takes place at three levels: individual, organization, and society (Checkoway, 2011). To be prepared for social involvement and transformation into digital citizens, youths have to acquire the following three skills: decision making, engagement and participation, and civic engagement (Arches and Fleming, 2006; Allatt, 2001; Bynner et al., 1997; Frazer and Emler, 1997).

From the review of related concepts, theories, and literature, the theoretical framework to exhibit the analysis and synthesis process for the study results can be expressed as follows:

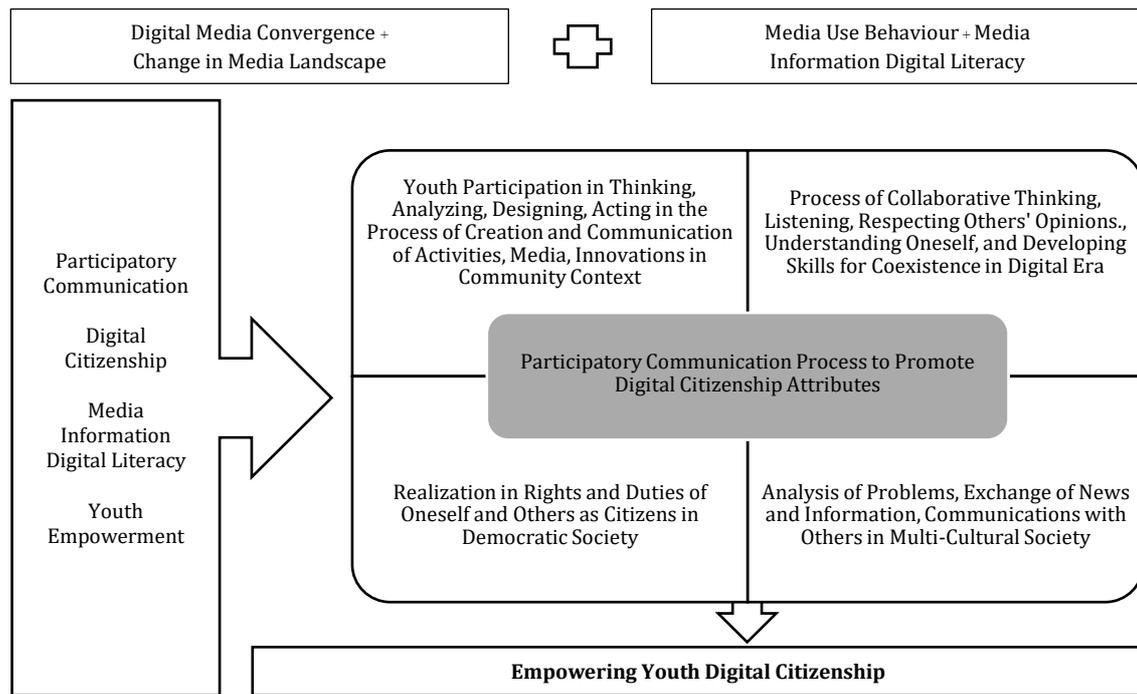


Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used focus groups and participatory observations in the communication process in four areas. The sample consisted of 40 volunteers involved in the Esan Toom Home Project. The volunteers were from four different universities in the northeast region, including Mahasarakham University, Kalasin University, Udon Thani Rajabhat University, and Sisaket Rajabhat University. The research instruments comprised a questionnaire survey concerning demographics and digital media use behavior, an observation form, and a focus group discussion. Data were analyzed according to qualitative research principles as follows:

1. Collecting data obtained from each research tool, examining the accuracy and concordance of data;
2. Manipulating data—data were obtained from the observation form and also from our subjective observation of the community's general atmosphere, as well as facial expressions and gestures of the research participants, after which the data were divided into appropriate categories.
3. Evaluating and analyzing quantitative data, determining the credibility of data, discussing and checking data accuracy.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1 Demographics and media use behavior of sample population

The participants in the sample group were 54% female and 46% male with ages ranging between 20 and 21 years old. All volunteers were juniors (3<sup>rd</sup> year university students). All participated in creative media development activities in the 1-2 years prior to this study.

Behavior-wise, the type of online media that the samples used the most was Youtube (100%), with Facebook (94%) and Instagram (68%) being the second and third most used, respectively. At the same time, the media that the samples reportedly used the least often were radio receivers, newspapers, and online radios, respectively.

#### 4.2 Mechanisms that empower youth digital citizenship in the northeast.

The key mechanisms to foster digital citizenship among the youths in the region are shown as follows:

Component 1: Youths with digital citizenship capacity—this concept can be defined as youth volunteers involved in generating ideas, designing, performing, or creating activities or processes related to communication, media, or innovative ideas in response to their community context. It also refers to those who

possess the necessary qualities, skills, and knowledge to use digital technology properly and creatively, as well as those who adhere to ethical and moral principles, while striving for personal growth and social development. Based on the study results, youth digital citizenship can be divided into four aspects ranging from the highest-reported to the lowest-reported among our sample group: (1) maintenance of identity and private data, (2) use of digital media, (3) skills and abilities required in the digital environment, and (4) digital ethics, respectively. Another aspect marked at a high level was the finding that youngsters have the knowledge and skills relevant to media literacy, as well as digital literacy. The internal factors influencing the development of youth digital citizenship are personal traits, family background, education, and media behavior. The external factors include friends and surrounding people, activities, community contexts, and receipt of information.

Component 2: Participatory communication—this is defined as the communication process wherein youth volunteers play a vital role in creating, designing, making decisions, and communicating their thoughts, from the start of the process to the end. In this regard, they get to share opinions and ideas, listen to others, recognize the rights and responsibilities of community members, participate in analyzing social issues, and share information with one another. The goal of such a process is clearly the active engagement of youth volunteers, community residents, and related sectors, each helping to set the goals of the process aimed at encouraging children and youths to change for the better, while also building strength within the community.

Component 3: Media or innovative ideas—this can be viewed as the creative work resulting from the collaboration of youth volunteers while attending projects related to local wisdom, traditions, arts, cultures, ways of life, and the community environment. This creative work may serve as a means of enhancing the learning of youth volunteers, children and adults in the community, as well as the general public. The media and innovations produced by youths included short films, documentaries, drama, Facebook pages, YouTube video clips, photographs, and civic news. An important feature of the production of such media or innovations is that it serves as a path to digital citizenship. It is also vital that the youths taking part in the production of media or innovations have adequate knowledge and understanding so that they can use digital technology in appropriate ways.

Component 4: Knowledge and skills—knowledge and skills developed by the Esan Toom Home Project volunteers included participatory communication skills, knowledge of digital citizenship, digital media literacy, youth empowerment, understanding of community context, local wisdom, arts, cultures, traditions, ways of life, cultural diversity. This resulted from the following three elements: (1) increased experience of youth volunteers; (2) the process of studying, researching, meeting, planning, and deciding on the direction of work by leading youths in collaboration with teachers and advisors (each educational institution has its own context, so each institution may use a different kind of knowledge or concept as their framework); (3) the support provided by the partnership networks such as the Children and Youth Institute, and the Foundation for Child Development—the arrangement of a workshop or training could help to increase knowledge and learning more about the concepts necessary for work.

Component 5: Support and Engagement of Networks—this occurs at the community, local and national levels, including educational institutions, government sectors, private sectors, press, and non-profit organizations, all of which support and encourage the growth of personnel, the embodiment of knowledge, and the set of practices associated with policies that facilitate the smooth operation of the process involved. This is accomplished by the provision of youth volunteers, platforms, equipment, grants, etc.

#### **4.3 Effects of the process for the empowerment of youth digital citizenship in the Northeast**

The effects of the process can be divided into four categories, as follows:

1. The effect on youth volunteers: The process allowed youth volunteers to better understand the relevant concepts and bodies of knowledge. Youth volunteers were capable of handling the communication process and producing media and innovations in a logical and systematic way. They also showed an understanding of the working process from the planning stage through to designing, evaluating, solving problems, and improving the quality of the work. Some other digital citizenship skills were developed, e.g., the actualization of one's own values and capabilities, faith in one's own power to create good things for the community and society, and the potential to be an inspiration for the children, friends, or young people in the society. Moreover, many aspects of their life skills were fostered, such as system management, process management, self-management, time management, ability to assign work, increased responsibility, communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, consideration of public benefits rather than personal benefits, reasonability, punctuality, ability to solve problems immediately, enthusiasm, analytical and synthesis skills, confidence, patience, adapting new ideas in one's own life, building new connections and networks, respect for one's own values and those of others, understanding of diversity and differences in society, positive thinking, not being too judgmental, having no bias, having the desire to change the community and society for the better, etc. The process of creative communication should also be used in children and youth development, encouraging communities, children, young people, and related networks to work collaboratively.

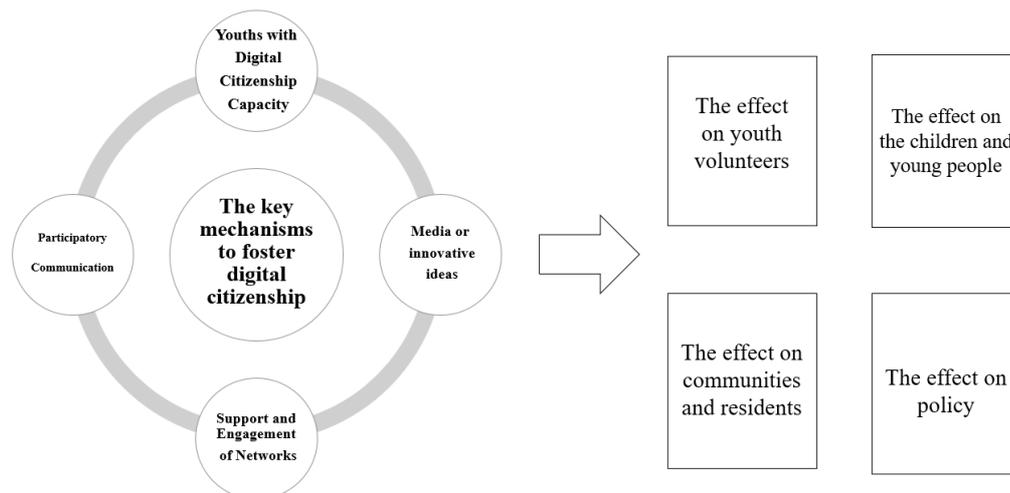
The topic being discussed should be a reflection of the local ways of life and should lead to a positive change for the sake of children, youth, and communities as a whole.

2. The effect on the children and young people participating in the project: They acquired knowledge about digital citizenship. Their literacy in media, informatics, and digital technology also increased. Young participants were able to produce media or innovations beneficial to themselves and their communities in terms of the way that local cultures, traditions, wisdom, and history were presented. Additionally, the participants were able to learn about the context of the Isan region, so they had a sense of pride and understanding about community values. They were open-minded to traditional cultures and tried to adjust to the community more than they did before, contributing to the acquisition of life skills, the ability to work with others, confidence, reasonability, critical and synthesis skills, responsibility for the given assignment, discipline, respect of rules, punctuality, generosity, harmony, respect for the opinions of others, the ability to solve a problems immediately, enthusiasm, knowing what should and should not be done according to the time and place, realizing one’s own values as well as knowledge and capability, feeling confident enough to do something that benefits the community and society, the ability to apply knowledge and skills acquired from engagement in the communication process in the classroom and even in school activities with the proper use of digital media, e.g., a photography club that produces creative media in the form of a short film for a class run by the Division of Career and Technology, or for some other activities, and it is a good idea to further improve their digital skills in a variety of ways.

3. The effect on communities and residents: Community members gained knowledge and understanding about the use of digital media in everyday life, as well as literacy in media, informatics, and digital technology. They were also able to learn about the guidelines used for monitoring the digital behavior of children and young people. The young people also benefited from using digital media in a creative and useful way; gaining an ability to analyze media and thus protect themselves from propaganda in digital media, produce their own media, and use it in a meaningful way. In turn, they started to recognize the importance of their communities and to engage themselves in the production of media or innovations for strength within the community in such aspects as community economics, tourism, arts, culture, wisdom, traditions, alternative careers, local cuisine, and ethnic cultures, all of which could greatly contribute to positive changes. Additionally, such development transformed communities into creative spaces and learning spaces with regards to religious tourism and cultural tourism, industries which involve a variety of activities and which are sources of community income.

4. The effect on policy: Communities receive constant support from related local agencies. Policies have been formulated in an attempt to transform communities into concrete learning environments for all. In addition, the related concepts—communication processes, digital media production, promoting understanding of digital citizenship, and implanting digital citizenship in youths—should be included in the curriculum at the school and university levels.

Mechanisms to empower youth digital citizenship and results from the process of digital citizenship promotion among youth in the northeast region of Thailand can be summarized as follows:



**Figure 2:** Mechanisms to Empower Youth Digital Citizenship and Results from the Process of Digital Citizenship Promotion Among Youth in the Northeast Region of Thailand

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study results showed that communication serves as a mechanism to enhance digital citizenship among young people involved in the Esan Toom Home Network, of which the five areas of focus are the digital citizenship capacity of youths, participatory communication, bodies of knowledge and concepts in support of the operation of the process, support, and engagement of the networks at the community, local, and national levels. The effect of these mechanisms can be categorized into four aspects, namely, effects on the volunteer, on the children and youth, on community residents, and on government policies.

It was found that youth empowerment relies upon various internal factors associated with individual characteristics and the external factors surrounding them. Attention should also be given to the roles and engagements of young people, so that awareness of relevant concepts can be fostered from within, thus transforming into internal strength and then into experience. Furthermore, a greater understanding of self and personal life skills will allow youths to be able to better understand their emotions and thoughts. As a result, they will be able to handle stress more effectively and to think more positively, both of which are characteristics that will result in better understanding of others, thus fostering useful social skills.

Relevant knowledge among young people enables them to make use of digital citizenship. However, the specific features, skills and knowledge required for digital citizenship are impossible to acquire just through in-class lectures, workshops, or memorization. It requires a certain process. In this study, the communication process serves as a practical set of guidelines by which youth participation in decision making can be developed. Another important means of developing skills is youth participation in the design of the processes for the appropriate use of digital technology in response to community contexts, which will eventually pave the path for the development of creativity, digital responsibility for the growth of one's own self, and that of children, young people, the community and society as a whole. All these things are essential for an ever-changing society, including the development of its economy, politics, technology, and ecosystems. Therefore, the empowerment of youth digital citizenship involves building life skills, self-awareness, awareness of others, and creative power for the benefit of the community and society.

In addition, the mechanisms used to promote digital citizenship in youth illustrate another important concept, namely, media information digital literacy. The study shows that young people have the skills to coexist in the digital era, searching and validating information, respecting others' rights and privacy, and protecting themselves from and understanding the risks inherent in the media. Furthermore, young people also possess the ability to produce and broadcast digital media and information to effect positive changes in society.

These skills also involve understanding and respecting rights, identities, and human dignity in a multicultural society. As a result, conflicts and problems can be handled peacefully, powering the benefits of the community and society.

Taking all our findings into consideration, we offer several suggestions concerning the mechanisms that empower youth digital citizenship, as described below:

1. Empowering youth digital citizenship should be tailored to the target children/young people, the community context and factors relevant to that context, with no regard for structure or management in formal education.
2. The concept of digital citizenship should be expanded to the empowerment of youths as well as all other groups of people in society, with a focus on explaining the importance of the process. Actions need to be taken seriously on a daily basis. Such actions could be expanded even more through collaboration and connections between various networks and sectors in society.

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