The Social Collaboration Platform for You, Your Community, and the World

Together we are Building a Better World for us and the Future

The Challenge

Humanity is exposed to a policrisis including climate change, biodiversity and wildlife loss, and pollution. The virtual technologies provide a unique opportunity to bring humanity together in an effort to tackle the polycrisis and avoid a global collapse. However, this opportunity is misused to funnel more wealth into the hands of a few and thereby sacrifices the opportunity to address the epistemic injustice that keeps the general public uninformed and misled about humanity's existential polycrisis.

As a result, scientific information about the polycrisis remains mostly with scientists and does not reach the broad public. There is "The Great Silence": the absence of coverage of the polycrises, which is indicative of the ongoing collapse of our industrial civilization. The Great Silence serves an economic system which has nothing to gain and everything to lose by reporting on and responding to the polycrisis. Ensuring an understanding of the challenges we face is simply not profitable, and would pose a significant threat to the current power structures. With the available social media, the grip of the Great Silence appears to be getting stronger, not weaker.

There is abundant research demonstrating the harm the currently available virtual infrastructure owned by commercial companies is causing. This infrastructure and the mass media are primarily concerned about profit maximization. To further this end, the virtual infrastructure is as addictive as possible, spreads conspiracy theories, stimulates fear and hate, and encourage users to spend as much as possible for more and more "stuff" which they don't really need. This addiction has now reached the point where the US Surgeon General recommends that these companies be required to include warnings about their products, similar to what the tobacco companies now do.

Paul Hawken in his 2007 book "Blessed Unrest" estimated that there are globally between 1 and 2 million groups aiming to address the polycrisis. Subsequent efforts to create a virtual platform that could provide a place for collaboration between these groups on local to global scale have not been very successful (e.g., Hawken's Wiser Earth site and a multitude of current forums like Hylo). Unfortunately, there is still no operational virtual infrastructure for the "Blessed Unrest" to develop synergies and coherence.

Our Answer to the Challenge

The not-for-profit Earth Viability Center, Inc., Norfolk, VA, is developing the social collaboration platform Place4Us (https://www.place4us.net). We recognize that the increasing mis- and disinformation on most social media platforms are not only causing social problems but is also detrimental to progress in tackling the global polycrisis of climate change, biodiversity and wildlife loss, and pollution. There is an urgent need for virtual infrastructure that can provide access to trusted knowledge and facilitate collaboration across societal sectors from local to global scales. Place4Us utilizes the novel concept of Virtual Community Centers (VCCs) that can host Communities of Practice, either topical or location-based. VCCs can connect in groups and clusters to share resources and to collaborate in many different ways across VCC boundaries. Our target audience includes all groups focusing on environmental justice, conservation and sustainability. Based on an ethics with the core values of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion, the mission of Place4Us is "to facilitate a Global Citizen Movement that brings together the very many groups and organizations that are working to bring humanity back into balance with the rest of nature and to ensure a future in which the basic needs of all people are met while safeguarding the Earth's life-support system on which the welfare of all human and non-human life depends."

Place4Us: A global ecosystem of Virtual Community Centers

Place4Us is a social collaboration platform that provides tools for Communities of Practice to establish Virtual Community Centers (VCCs) and to build networks and clusters of VCCs that share resources across VCC boundaries. The VCCs are designed for broad participation in learning, deliberating, coordinating, and acting. Place4Us also provides platform-wide areas for groups to publish, organize and conduct actions in the real world, identify urgent issues in the real world, and support groups that face serious challenges. A special area is being built to provide support to people forced into involuntary migration. Many high-level assessments indicate that the number of involuntary migrants is expected to increase rapidly over the next few decades, and we see the need for a space where help can be provided to these people.

Place4Us is a virtual companion for the "Blessed Unrest." It aims to end "The Great Silence" by providing a place to communicate the challenges we face, to find pathways to address them, to deliberate, and to reduce the epistemic injustice. It provides an environment with trusted information on our current situation from local to global scales. Place4Us aims at facilitating broad and cross-society participation in our efforts to restore the health of the ailing life-support system of our planet, and to lead us back to a true understanding of the reciprocity between humanity and the Earth's life-support system.

Place4Us is Different

No Commercialization: Place4Us, on the other hand, is actually prohibited from commercialization. Place4Us is developed under the administrative lead of the Earth Viability Center, Inc. (EVC), a 501(C)3 non-profit company registered in Virginia, USA. The bylaws of the EVC ensure that no commercial agent can achieve influence over Place4Us and that the products of the EVC are in the creative commons, i.e., none of the EVC code can ever be sold.

Benefits for Users: The benefits from using Place4Us are developmental benefits, that is, learning and community building that comes from sharing and collaborating in meaningful work. Place4Us is intended to be a place for trusted information. Extensive safeguards prevent gossip, bullying, hate-speech, fear-mongering, and polarization, and the spreading of mis- and disinformation. Place4Us provides means for all participants and the public to flag any activity that potentially violates the ethos of Place4Us, and algorithms and procedures are in place to react to messages on this channel at appropriate levels and within reasonable times.

Governed by Users: Place4Us is governed by the Place4Us Plenary of registered Place4Us participants. Each participant has one voice in this Plenary. The Place4Us participants determine the design and development of the platform so that it fully meets their needs.

Current Status of Place4Us

While Place4Us still has many parts that require further development, the fully functional parts support a number of activities and projects. The number of VCCs is increasing, and many of the VCCs already provide trusted information to the members and the general public. The VCC concept and the platform-wide services are described below.

Place4Us includes services and spaces available to all participants. The Town Square has space for publications (Bark), for organization of real-world activities and actions (Roar), to address urgent emergencies of different kinds (Scream) and to seek help for recovery from such emergencies (Heal). The Stage provides a place for groups to feature their successes and to discuss with the audience the next steps. The Harbor is intended as a place where those forced into involuntary migration can seek help.

Place4Us has some significant implementation gaps: The direct messaging service Confab lacks a mobile device app that would make this service fully functional. The presentation of Place4Us on mobile devices is not polished. Several floors for VCCs are not fully functional or in conceptual state. Several areas on the Town Square are still conceptual and so is the Harbor. The concepts for grouping and clustering of VCCs are under development.

What we Need to Make Urgent Progress

We are so far an entirely volunteer organization and need funding for the urgent development of software code and associated apps, outreach to relevant communities of practice, as well as hosting pilot projects on Place4Us. The programmers need to be elite class programmers. The initial person years estimates are on the order of ten years of top programmers, four years for app developments, two years for cybersecurity, four years for data scientists, three years for librarian, and one year for evaluation.