

Methods of Decentralization:

Two methods can be used to achieve decentralization: disintermediation and competition. These methods will be discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

The concept of **disintermediation** can be explained with the aid of an example. Imagine that you want to send money to a friend in another country. You go to a bank, which, for a fee, will transfer your money to the bank in that country. In this case, the bank maintains a central database that is updated, confirming that you have sent the money. With blockchain technology, it is possible to send this money directly to your friend without the need for a bank. All you need is the address of your friend on the blockchain. This way, the intermediary (that is, the bank) is no longer required, and decentralization is achieved by disintermediation. It is debatable, however, how practical decentralization through disintermediation is in the financial sector due to the massive regulatory and compliance requirements. Nevertheless, this model can be used not only in finance but in many other industries as well, such as health, law, and the public sector. In the health industry, where patients, instead of relying on a trusted third party (such as the hospital record system) can be in full control of their own identity and their data that they can share directly with only those entities that they trust. As a general solution, blockchain can serve as a decentralized health record management system where health records can be exchanged securely and directly between different entities (hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, patients) globally without any central authority.

Contest-driven decentralization:

In the method involving **competition**, different service providers compete with each other in order to be selected for the provision of services by the system. This paradigm does not achieve complete decentralization. However, to a certain degree, it ensures that an intermediary or service provider is not monopolizing the service. In the context of blockchain technology, a system can be envisioned in which smart contracts can choose an external data provider from a large number of providers based on their reputation, previous score, reviews, and quality of service.

This method will not result in full decentralization, but it allows smart contracts to make a free choice based on the criteria just mentioned. This way, an environment of competition is cultivated among service providers where they compete with each other to become the data provider of choice.

In the following diagram, varying levels of decentralization are shown. On the left side, the conventional approach is shown where a central system is in control; on the right side, complete disintermediation is achieved, as intermediaries are entirely removed. Competing intermediaries or service providers are shown in the center. At that level, intermediaries or service providers are selected based on reputation or voting, thus achieving partial decentralization:

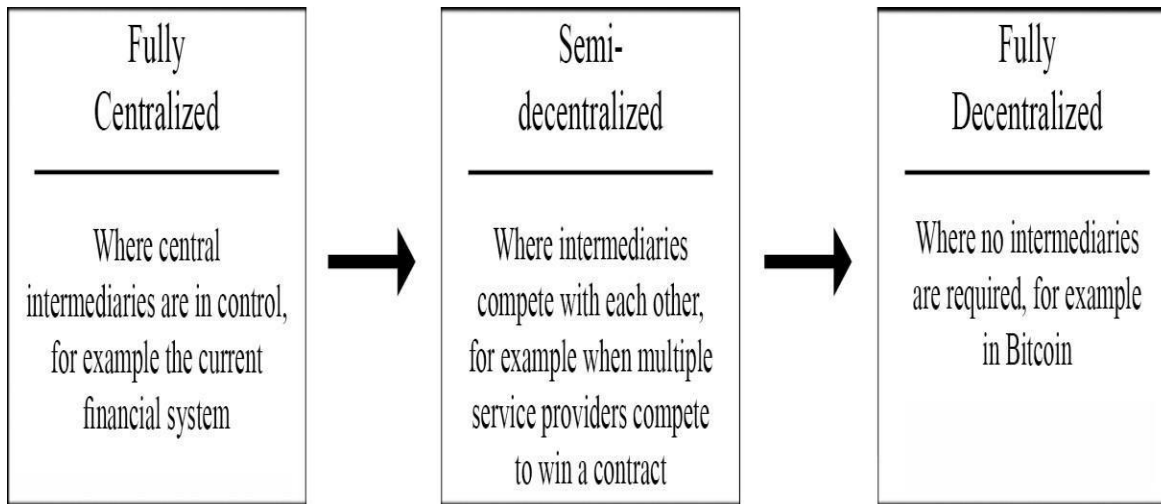


Figure : Scale of decentralization

There are many benefits of decentralization, including transparency, efficiency, cost saving, development of trusted ecosystems, and in some cases privacy and anonymity. Some challenges, such as security requirements, software bugs, and human error, need to be examined thoroughly.

This view raises some fundamental questions. Is a blockchain really needed? When is a blockchain required? In what circumstances is blockchain preferable to traditional databases? To answer these questions, go through the simple set of questions presented below:

Question	Yes/No	Recommended solution
Is high data throughput required?	Yes	Use a traditional database.
	No	A central database might still be useful if other requirements are met. For example, if users trust each other, then perhaps there is no need for a blockchain. However, if they don't or trust cannot be established for any reason, blockchain can be helpful.

Are updates centrally controlled?	Yes	Use a traditional database.
	No	You may investigate how a public/private blockchain can help.
Do users trust each other?	Yes	Use a traditional database.
	No	Use a public blockchain.
Are users anonymous?	Yes	Use a public blockchain.
	No	Use a private blockchain.
Is consensus required to be maintained within a consortium?	Yes	Use a private blockchain.
	No	Use a public blockchain.
Is strict data immutability required?	Yes	Use a blockchain.
	No	Use a central/traditional database.

Answering all of these questions can help you decide whether or not a blockchain is required or suitable for solving the problem. Beyond the questions posed in this model, there are many other issues to consider, such as latency, choice of consensus mechanisms, whether consensus is required or not, and where consensus is going to be achieved. If consensus is maintained internally by a consortium, then a private blockchain should be used; otherwise, if consensus is required publicly among multiple entities, then a public blockchain solution should be considered. Other aspects, such as immutability, should also be considered when deciding whether to use a blockchain or a traditional database. If strict data immutability is required, then a public blockchain should be used; otherwise, a central database may be an option.

As blockchain technology matures, there will be more questions raised regarding this selection model. For now, however, this set of questions is sufficient for deciding whether a blockchain-based solution is suitable or not.

Now we understand different methods of decentralization and have looked at how to decide whether a blockchain is required or not in a particular scenario. Let's now look at the process of decentralization, that is, how we can take an existing system and decentralize it.

Routes to decentralization:

There are systems that pre-date blockchain and Bitcoin, including BitTorrent and the Gnutella file-sharing system, which to a certain degree could be classified as decentralized, but due to a lack of any incentivization mechanism, participation from the community gradually decreased. There wasn't any incentive to keep the users interested in participating in the growth of the network. With the advent of blockchain technology, many initiatives are being taken to leverage this new technology to achieve decentralization. The Bitcoin blockchain is typically the first choice for many, as it has proven to be the most resilient and secure blockchain and has a market cap of nearly \$166 billion at the time of writing. Alternatively, other blockchains, such as Ethereum, serve as the tool of choice for many developers for building decentralized applications. Compared to Bitcoin, Ethereum has become a more prominent choice because of the flexibility it allows for programming any business logic into the blockchain by using **smart contracts**.

How to decentralize

The framework raises four questions whose answers provide a clear understanding of how a system can be decentralized:

1. What is being decentralized?
2. What level of decentralization is required?
3. What blockchain is used?
4. What security mechanism is used?

The first question simply asks you to identify what system is being decentralized. This can be any system, such as an identity system or a trading system.

The second question asks you to specify the level of decentralization required by examining the scale of decentralization, as discussed earlier. It can be full disintermediation or partial disintermediation.

The third question asks developers to determine which blockchain is suitable for a particular application. It can be Bitcoin blockchain, Ethereum blockchain, or any other blockchain that is deemed fit for the specific application.

Finally, a fundamental question that needs to be addressed is how the security of a decentralized system will be guaranteed. For example, the security mechanism can be atomicity-based, where either the transaction executes in full or does not execute at all. This deterministic approach ensures the integrity of the system. Other mechanisms may include one based on reputation, which allows for varying degrees of trust in a system.

In the following section, let's evaluate a money transfer system as an example of an application selected to be decentralized.

Decentralization framework example:

The four questions discussed previously are used to evaluate the decentralization requirements of this application. The answers to these questions are as follows:

1. Money transfer system
2. Disintermediation
3. Bitcoin
4. Atomicity

The responses indicate that the money transfer system can be decentralized by removing the intermediary, implemented on the Bitcoin blockchain, and that a security guarantee will be provided via atomicity. Atomicity will ensure that transactions execute successfully in full or do not execute at all. We have chosen the Bitcoin blockchain because it is the longest established blockchain and has stood the test of time.

Similarly, this framework can be used for any other system that needs to be evaluated in terms of decentralization. The answers to these four simple questions help clarify what approach to take to decentralize the system.

To achieve complete decentralization, it is necessary that the environment around the blockchain also be decentralized. We'll look at the full ecosystem of decentralization next.

The blockchain is a distributed ledger that runs on top of conventional systems. These elements include storage, communication, and computation.

Storage

Data can be stored directly in a blockchain, and with this fact it achieves decentralization. However, a significant disadvantage of this approach is that a blockchain is not suitable for storing large amounts of data by design. It can store simple transactions and some arbitrary data, but it is certainly not suitable for storing images or large blobs of data, as is the case with traditional database systems.

A better alternative for storing data is to use **distributed hash tables (DHTs)**. DHTs were used initially in peer-to-peer file sharing software, such as BitTorrent, Napster, Kazaa, and Gnutella. DHT research was made popular by the CAN, Chord, Pastry, and Tapestry projects. BitTorrent is the most scalable and fastest network, but the issue with BitTorrent and the others is that there is no incentive for users to keep the files indefinitely. Users generally don't keep files permanently, and if nodes that have data still required by someone leave the network, there is no way to retrieve it except by having the required nodes rejoin the network so that the files once again become available.

Two primary requirements here are high availability and link stability, which means that data should be available when required and network links also should always be accessible. **Inter-Planetary File System (IPFS)** by Juan Benet possesses both of these properties, and its vision is to provide a decentralized World Wide Web by replacing the HTTP protocol. IPFS uses Kademlia DHT and Merkle **Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs)** to provide storage and searching functionality, respectively.

The incentive mechanism for storing data is based on a protocol known as Filecoin, which pays incentives to nodes that store data using the Bitswap mechanism. The Bitswap mechanism lets nodes keep a simple ledger of bytes sent or bytes received in a one-to-one relationship. Also, a Git-based version control mechanism is used in IPFS to provide structure and control over the versioning of data.

There are other alternatives for data storage, such as Ethereum Swarm, Storj, and MaidSafe. Ethereum has its own decentralized and distributed ecosystem that uses Swarm for storage and the Whisper protocol for communication. MaidSafe aims to provide a decentralized World Wide Web. All of these projects are discussed later in this book in greater detail.

BigChainDB is another storage layer decentralization project aimed at providing a scalable, fast, and linearly scalable decentralized database as opposed to a traditional filesystem. BigChainDB complements decentralized processing platforms and filesystems such as Ethereum and IPFS.

Communication

The Internet (the communication layer in blockchain) is considered to be decentralized. This belief is correct to some extent, as the original vision of the Internet was to develop a decentralized communications system. Services such as email and online storage are now all based on a paradigm where the service provider is in control, and users trust such providers to grant them access to the service as requested. This model is based on the unconditional trust of a central authority (the service provider) where users are not in control of their data. Even user passwords are stored on trusted third-party systems.

Thus, there is a need to provide control to individual users in such a way that access to their data is guaranteed and is not dependent on a single third party.

Access to the Internet (the communication layer) is based on **Internet Service Providers (ISPs)** who act as a central hub for Internet users. If the ISP is shut down for any reason, then no communication is possible with this model.

An alternative is to use **mesh networks**. Even though they are limited in functionality when compared to the Internet, they still provide a decentralized alternative where nodes can talk directly to each other without a central hub such as an ISP.

Now imagine a network that allows users to be in control of their communication; no one can shut it down for any reason. This could be the next step toward decentralizing communication networks in the blockchain ecosystem. It must be noted that this model may only be vital in a jurisdiction where the Internet is censored and controlled by the government.

As mentioned earlier, the original vision of the Internet was to build a decentralized network; however, over the years, with the advent of large-scale service providers such as Google, Amazon, and eBay, control is shifting toward these big players. For example, email is a decentralized system at its core; that is, anyone can run an email server with minimal effort and can start sending and receiving emails. There are better alternatives available. For example, Gmail and Outlook already provide managed services for end users, so there is a natural inclination toward selecting one of these large centralized services as they are more convenient and free to use. This is one example that shows how the Internet has moved toward centralization.

Free services, however, are offered at the cost of exposing valuable personal data, and many users are unaware of this fact. Blockchain has revived the vision of decentralization across the world, and now concerted efforts are being made to harness this technology and take advantage of the benefits that it can provide.