Editorial

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the Kiev UNESCO International Research and Training Centre Institute and the honorary title of Doctor from the Capital Normal University in Beijing, China. His works on international projects, conferences and journals stretch from media technologies to creative design methods and policy making for the networked society.

This special issue exceeds the level of detecting the particular benefits of web-based gathering as normally brought forward. It is the awareness that communities face the fact that persons 'meet' rather than collaborate, compete, *etc*. As articulated at the end of this editorial, the existential phenomenon of 'being' is predominant rather than the modalities of 'representing' or 'defending' when ego or belongings are at stake. The pragmatic added values of web-based communities have been highlighted in earlier special issues of this journal. Even more intriguing is the question if and how they will affect the fundamental experience of 'meeting' the other. As time and unconditional attention become the rarest resources in our life there is a need for virtualisation. Even before we touch the question how the community as such may incorporate virtual aspects, of course the question is there how the person-to-person encountering may adopt features of virtuality. One such feature is the mechanism of vicarious participation; one person may act on behalf of another person. Based upon delegation we may expect a growing interest in formalising personal agenda's that can be delegated to another person who will provide full attention to the other person's goals.

In the 1990's, and due to the World Wide Web development, the Online Communities, later known as Virtual Communities (VCs), were born. VCs emerged from research in Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) that materialised in the 1980's (Grudin, 1994) to study the ways people interact and communicate in a community perspective, and that incorporated people from computing, sociology, psychology, economy, as well as other fields. VCs have been the subject of particular attention and were defined and classified in different ways (El Morr and Kawash, 2007; Preece, 2000; Weissman, 2000).

VCs vary in the tools they use (*e.g.*, email lists, forums, chat rooms), the wide domain of applications (*e.g.*, tourism, health, sociability, leisure), the communication mode (synchronous or asynchronous), and in many other aspects. In the 1990's mobility emerged in the telecommunication industry and had a remarkable impact of VC research; particularly on the design challenges (Dix *et al*., 2000; Preece, 2000; Raptis *et al*., 2005), the infrastructure to use (Kaji *et al*., 2002; Sousa and Garlan, 2002), the services to offer (Li and Leung, 1997), the user interface (Cole and Stanton, 2003; Keranen *et al*., 2003), the security (Abdul-Rahman and Hailes, 2000) and the privacy of the users (Häkkilä and Chatfield, 2005).

With the multiplication of communication medium, the increasing multi-partner global organisations, the remote working tendencies, the dynamic teams, the pervasive or ubiquitous computing, and wearable computing, VCs are expected to play an increased role in social organisations and will probably change profoundly the way people interact. On the other hand, the emergence of the information society depends in a great part on

the way the information is exchanged between collaborating groups; in this context, VCs appears to be one of the pillars of the information society. We believe that tomorrows' applications in the information society will be developed on the concept of community.

This special issue proposes diverse current research occurring in the VC field. The first three papers address *intrinsic characteristics* and *incentives/acceptance* of VCs.

1   In an intensive survey Kosonen highlights intrinsic characteristics of VCs for knowledge management. VCs' definitions, the status of knowledge, the knowledge sharing perspectives and facilitators are listed and compared.

2   Matti presents a new model of mobile communication acceptance. This model is based on a real life study validated by an in depth review of the existing models.

3   Panayotis and Le Grand consider incentives to promote user's contributions into self-organised communities; they present relevant categories of incentives, and propose a cross layer incentive mechanism.

The next three papers consider the *structure and the dynamics* of VCs.

1   Robardet and Fleury propose a study of communities' structure and dynamics. They apply their approach on the research community with formal graph analysis on co-authorships. Technical conclusions may not only interest scientists.

2   Müller-Seitz contribution is centred on the fundamental characteristics of open source software projects that are fully based on a VC's dynamics. Parallels and differences with biotechnological innovation are highlighted through a case study.

3   Assaf *et al*. present the value of providing personalised e-learning services in a VC and the detail of a personalised learning model.

Two other papers address the use of VCs to enhance the *person to person collaboration* and collaborative work.

1   With a cognition viewpoint, Ihara *et al*. propose the original concept of human affordance to assist text-based communication within computer-mediated communities. Concepts and detailed experimental results are presented.

2   Laborde *et al*. propose a practical model of a collaborative environment for administrative workflow; they specify the requirements and characteristics of such virtual organisations, and especially roles, access control and security mechanisms.

Privacy is the topic of the last two papers.

1   Chowdhury *et al*. contribution emphasises the privacy challenges in web based social communities; they propose a distributed high granularity control mechanism, based on personal contexts.

2   Abdulsalam and Shervin address trading personal profiles challenges. Beyond simple privacy protection, they propose a novel business model for online interactions between companies and consumers that capitalise on the value of personal information.

We believe that this special issue provides readers with current interdisciplinary views on VCs that help fostering the current diverse initiatives in the field.

However, what happens inside a VC on the personal level is another question and deserves its own special issue; Fromm (1993), the renowned psychoanalyst, distinguished between two modes of life: having and being; for people living in the *being* mode a "conversation ceases to be an exchange of commodities (information, knowledge, status) and becomes a dialogue…The duelists begin to dance together, and they part not with triumph or sorrow - which are equally sterile - but with joy." A VC constitutes a framework for people to meet; in the same perspective drawn by Fromm's remark, we believe that communication in a VC as well as in the 'physical' community can be a simple exchange of information or a genuine human meeting, it depends on us to make an encounter a deeply human and alive experience, one must not forget that sharing is in the centre of the Latin origin of the word 'community'.

If we accept the challenge to reconsider the phenomena of humans to 'meet' and 'communities' we do not only face its recent technological fascination. In fact, the new web based 'environments' may revitalise the more fundamental questions raised by Fromm (1993) and Buber (2002) who have essentially addressed the issue of the person and 'the other'. Studies of web-based communities do not only face the revision of the concepts of communication and cooperation; indeed, they are a provocation to those who undertake innovations in education, health and other aspects of society. How will the person of pupil, patient or citizen evolve as a result of virtual presence and vicarious membership? These are the questions emerging from the following articles.

We wish you inspiration in elaborating its consequences.

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