
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Piet Kommers is an Associate Professor at the University of Twente at the Department of Media, Communication and Organisation. He Chairs the IADIS Conferences <http://www.mccsis.org/> and the E-society Conference and Web-based Communities Conference in particular. In his work for UNESCO, he brings forward the blend between the nature and the culture of learning. He distinguishes the 'new' media as catalytic to communication and awareness. In his view, learning gradually embeds in every aspect of life pertaining to the delicate question if learning can be orchestrated essentially. Similarly, we may question if communication can be 'arranged' as we ought to believe at the dawn of the social web.

Margriet Simmerling is a Peer Consultant/Senior Manager for R&D projects in the area of e-society and web-based communities. She participated in the Advisory Board for the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and is active as a Reviewer for the European Commission. She designs and moderates e-learning modules and workshops e-learning modules and workshops in the domain of education technology and psychology at the PhD level.

1 More potential for social networks

Social networks are the fundament for communities. The impact of social networks is growing. In this issue 25 authors from seven different countries: Japan, UK, Italy, China, India, the USA and The Netherlands share their finding, each from a different user environment/perspective. All together, this issue provides the reader with new information about knowledge portals, network management, professional development, accessibility of disabled persons, collaborative knowledge construction, user profiles, web logs, twitter for crisis communication, and the role of administrators.

2 Three-dimensions in social media

Social media can be characterised as being a bridge between interpersonal- and mass communication. The most common questions lately are why its popularity has grown so fast? Is it just the availability and the comfort of having your network relations available on one website, or is there a more essential underlying dimension that explains its fast propagation? And: is social media particularly tuned to the younger generation of teens and adolescents, as we might understand from the current trends in Facebook and even in LinkedIn? Has social media a higher attraction than the perceived risks of losing privacy and the needed efforts to solve the interference with traditional ways of working?

2.1 *Mono-/multimedia*

The first dimension is the degree of social presence:

- 1 Being participant in correspondence via text like blogging and twittering. The topic may be intriguing, however, the modality is limited: No explicit awareness of social structure, no facial expressions and no explicit reference to topologies or space.
- 2 Joining social web-based social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr, YouTube and Myspace, etc. These systems have a higher similarity to real-life social contacts: Your first-order relationships introduce you to their relations; Its members keep each other up-to-date on current and future activities; a more altruistic attitude is provoked as sharing has supplanted the idea that physical properties can only belong to one person.
- 3 Being in virtual environments (3D worlds) like for instance second life and Google Earth. The resemblance to the real-life world has become stronger as the perceptual consequences of residence have grown infinitesimal closely to the real physical presence: Visually, acoustically, haptic and tactile; fragrance still needs time to develop technically.

Though the transition from level 2 into level 3 has attracted substantial interest for the consumer market (teleshopping) and the entertainment industry (gaming and reality TV) it has not yet been recognised as feasible channels at the moment. Immersion is a target for web-applications. However, the user is not keen yet on its added value effects; instead of 'moving through' a virtual space, the average user is more keen on the virtues of 'abstract multi-presence': the flexibility to jump in and out a variety of settings without really investing in it. In this way, the attitude of the immigrants in virtual reality still inherit the manner of zapping as usual in mass media like newspapers and the linear TV channels.

2.2 *Individual-/collaborative media*

The second dimension is the one of (a) individual versus the (b) collaborative. The trend from a to b can be seen at the three-levels of presence. Instead of writing individual columns, the digital natives tend to resolve their ideas in a wider cacophony of peers who claim different nuances in opinions and facts. At the level of textual correspondence, the low collaborative mode is that of a chat or of a Wiki contribution. The more collaborative version of Facebook is joint photo collections on for instance Flickr. Collaborative

actions in 3D worlds can ultimately be found in online video games. Both the immersion, collaborative/competitive and the degree of social presence are high. It may be clear that social media like Facebook and the like have still a long way to go, before the impact of real-time video games can be met.

2.3 *Monotype-/blended media*

The dimension broadcasted (mass-)media versus the (web-based) personal one-one and one-to-group has been recognised as an essential one. The success and effects of web-based communities seem to rely on the inherent trend to offer individuals more and more tools for balancing between these two-extremes. Where chatting and video conferencing (via Skype) have gained momentum, it is also the aggregation of individual – up to the level of shared expressions that is needed before it may reach a level of collective awareness like needed for societal problem solving. The speed of adopting social media can be understood via the uses and gratification theory that says that the real factor that decides upon users' dedication to a certain medium is its unforeseen added functionalities like for instance SMS on the mobile phone. Even beyond the choice of media functionalities, we face combinations of various media: face-to-face, the telephone, the web and the traditional surface mail for instance. We call this phenomenon: multi-channelling or 'blended media'. For a number of reasons the blended media are superior in its effectiveness and guaranteeing.

In summary: the passion for social media rests upon its unification of the more advanced sides of the three-preceding dimensions. Social media as the foundation for web-based communities rests upon

- 1 Multimodal-, mobile-, ubiquitous- and finally, immersive media that allow persons to navigate freely and that allow multi-presence (participation in various social networks at the same time).
- 2 Collaborative gaming and playing as an overall genre for working, learning and care. Humans, especially youngsters prefer more and more exciting ways of contributing to peers, colleagues and neighbours. Being community members it helps if this genre is an applied progressively. This might be the reason that the highest concentration of web-based communities flourishes among the players of MMORPGs: massively multiplayer online role-playing games.
- 3 The possibility of blended-, multi-channelling media that complement each other; The real presence (face-to-face) with the smart phone, the living room with the 3D TV and in all situations the access to members of one's social network. These technologies encourage humans to combine, interleave and exploit social relationships simultaneously; web-based communities rest upon people's need to perform better, quicker and more excitingly.

These irreversible trends are the background for a number of studies in the articles of this special issue in which sharing, profiling, learning, self-organisation, online forums, accessibility and role-playing are the crucial ingredients.

The first article, 'Sharing experiences with using next generation knowledge portals for advancing web communities' discusses the usage of intra- and inter-tagging functionality. Nik Bessis, Alfredo Gaitan, Mitul Shukla and Zhihua Lai describe

experiences learnt from the development of two-repositories of shared knowledge. Is there even more potential for social networks in the near future? From what direction may we expect even more exciting and obtrusive practices like we are bombarded with the Wii, the kinaesthetic, haptic 3D game console, the I-Pad and soon the brain-detected emotional interface unexpectedly.

Stefano Bortoli, Themis Palpanas and Paolo Bouquet argue for a decentralised paradigm for social networking, in which users retain control of their profiles, and social networking sites focus on the delivery of innovative and competitive services. In their article, 'Decentralised social network management' ('Foaf-O-matic') is presented as a solution.

Looking at a typical professional setting, the inevitable question to answer is: can 'learning networks' be built on social network sites? The authors Francis Brouns, Adriana J. Berlanga, Sibren Fetter, Marlies E. Bitter-Rijkema, Jan M. van Bruggen, and Peter B. Sloep assert that this is possible indeed. 'A survey on social network sites to determine requirements for learning networks for professional development of university staff' provides an interesting survey regarding a further evolution and specialisation of web-based social network related technologies. It presents quite an extensive introduction that helps readers in building the necessary context for understanding the matter.

What about disabled users? Indeed they benefit a lot from the social networks, however, developers have to be aware of technical barriers that excluded a significant part of an important user group. Joanne Kuzma, Sue Barnes and Klaus Oestreicher studied if and how CAPTCHA is used in 150-online forums. The article 'CAPTCHA accessibility study of online forums' presents alternatives as well. It is up to the community groups to work together with the developers to find a solution to give disabled people equal access. We hope this article is a contribution to this process.

Looking for more practical teaching suggestions? Lisa Cheung shares with us her finding in her article entitled: 'Second language learner perceptions of ICT community to support collaborative knowledge construction in an English writing course'. Subjects in her study are first-year undergraduates from the University of Hong Kong University. These students follow a major study in the medical field. The results are encouraging. The findings and implications are a guide to further research directions.

What about blogging? Is blogging helpful for medical students? What are reasons for students to blog and what is the result? Is this the way to survive in a demanding stressful study? The article 'Medical students' international blogging community: a coping mechanism to survive the difficult years of medical school' is an exploratory study. Salam N. Abdo, Tatyana G. Pashnyak and Vanessa P. Dennen selected and analysed blogs of medical students, who used blogging technology to communicate with other medical students around the world. The results are promising.

All previous articles indicate that web-based communities are useful for all kind of user groups. Personalisation and tuning of web services is becoming more and more important. H. Hannah Inbarani and K. Thangavel propose an intelligent fuzzy clustering algorithm. The article 'Discovery of user profiles using fuzzy web intelligent techniques' gives an excellent description of different clustering methods. The proposed new method gives a promising direction for the future.

Speaking about the future... What will happen to the leadership in informal communities. For example, in Flickr, a photo sharing site, Paul Holmes and Andrew Cox shares with us his investigations around the role played by admins. Future research is

outlined. Remarkable outcome is the dedication that admins express to perform their role and task. It could be an important contribution to the success of a community.

Last but not least Adam Acar and Yuya Muraki investigated the usage of Twitter during the earthquake and the tsunami that hit Japan on March 11th 2011. The article 'Twitter for crisis communication: lessons learned from Japan's tsunami disaster' presents important conclusions, recommendations and outline of further research.

Without doubt the members of the *IJWBC* editorial board are important for the success of the *IJWBC*. Their excellent review reports inspired the authors to make improvements and fine tune their manuscript.

We look forward to presenting you the special issue dedicated to recommender systems to support the dynamics of virtual learning communities. It can be concluded that web-based communities are evolving very rapidly and researchers around the world are working together to make its first underlying mechanisms clear.

Please feel very welcome to use Facebook and LinkedIn on the *IJWBC* web page and its yearly conference <http://www.webcommunities-conf.org/>.