The Future Internet: The Social Nature of Technical Choices
A SEMINAR ORGANIZED BY SESERV

Online Communities and new technologies.

New key technologies relating to online communities can be understood in the context of the uptake of social technologies such as micro-blogging applications and social network sites: An application like Path (for iPhone), for example, introduces the idea of limited friendship networks based on the Dunbar number (cognitive limit to number of people with whom one can maintain a social relationship). Thus, this application is about enabling users to better control what information is shared with online social networks. Other key new technologies include live synchronization of social networking content to multiple networks, in particular user profiles.

1. Existing socio-technical barriers

- **Application and technology providers dictate terms of use**

    Currently application and technology providers dictate terms of use of their products/ platforms. Users, in contrast, cannot bear any direct influence on terms of use, and therefore lack control.

2.   Current/future socio-technical challenges

- **Developing technologies to support community 'health'**

    With the increased participation in online communities there is a need for developing technologies that support the 'health' of communities, e.g. growth, structure and maintenance.

- **Enabling the linking of systems while maintaining user-control and -centricity**

    User-centric platform-bridging applications with transparent filtering options should be developed for synchronization of content across platforms and networks. The key challenge being that users should be able to easily manage and control their information sharing with the online communities they form part of.

- **Allowing for new communities/structures to drive development**

    Technologies are not the only drivers of development for online communities; new types of communities could be emerging to shape new technologies, just as different community structures may be required for sharing, or co-creating content. There is a need to balance bottom-up and bottom-down technology development.

- **Facilitating better tools for managing online communities**

A key challenge is equipping users with tools for managing and creating smaller community hubs mirroring the theoretical cognitive limit for social relationships (c.f. Dunbar's number). Simultaneously, it is important to raise awareness of the limitations and strengths of smaller online communities (e.g. less information accessible). In particular, privacy is a massive concern when sharing information and publishing content online, and increased numbers of smaller online communities might therefore become a way of handling privacy issues.

- **Defining a normative framework for technology use**

There is a need to define a normative framework for technology use, which might include strategies for managing different contexts.

- **Balancing the right "to be forgotten" in the digital sphere**

Informed and balanced discussions on the right to be forgotten (have online content permanently deleted) in the digital sphere should be facilitated. This right should not necessarily come to include acts in the public sphere. For example, it might not be right to allow actors/entities having committed crimes against humanity, this right to be forgotten.

- **Developing a research tool box for understanding online communities**

Moral philosophers and social scientists need a toolbox enabling them to examine and assess online communities better.

- **Enabling creative uses of applications to influence system development**

Users make innovative and creative uses of systems and applications. A future challenge is facilitating structures for translating and feeding the creativity of users into the system in order to improve and develop it further.

3. Moving forward: Strategies for bridging the gaps

- Examine the frequency and need for multi-disciplinary meetings and conferences, and possibly fund a larger number of multidisciplinary research centres and departments.
- Delivering further media literacy education to help solve problems related to privacy.
- Initiate research that can generate knowledge on 'behind the scenes'-processes of socio-technical systems, and user-motivations.
- Develop regulatory framework that are consistent and guarantee anonymity (conditionally or dependent on domain, e.g. if wanting to talk about politically sensitive topics).