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Promoting more sustainable futures, the MoSoSo way

When mobile devices and social networks are combined, they have the power to change to world, writes Giuseppe Lugano.

ON 3 APRIL 1973, Motorola executive **Martin Cooper** made the world's first call on a mobile phone – to his rival **Joel Engel** of Bell Labs. That mobile phone weighed more than one kilo and had no other features than the call function. Since then, mobile phones have become lighter, fancier, cheaper and much more powerful. The turn of the millennium opened the era of the smartphone, a portable multimedia computer that can act – at our convenience – as a digital camera, camcorder, music player, audio recorder or navigation system. The almost endless number of functions suggests that mobile devices are designed to satisfy all kinds of everyday needs, not only communication needs. Indeed, smartphones do not

lic and private space, posing new challenges to the concept of personal privacy.

A MOBILE device is inherently a double-edged sword because it reflects the complexity of human nature. This observation suggests that designing mobile devices and services for the purpose of positively shaping future society is simply a utopia. However, the findings of my doctoral thesis, *Digital community design*, point towards a different conclusion. Indeed, Mobile Social Software (MoSoSo) an emerging class of mobile applications supporting informal mobile social networking for which smartphones are particularly well suited, may offer us a powerful means to realise more sustainable futures.

Mobile communication has gradually altered the boundaries between public and private space, posing new challenges to the concept of personal privacy.

support only interpersonal communication at distance, but also location-based services exploiting GPS or sensors like Bluetooth, instant sharing of digital media, group communication and mobile social networking.

ON CLOSER inspection, we must acknowledge that mobile devices have not only changed their shape, but ultimately also the shape of our society. Among the positive effects, mobile phones have let us overcome the physical distance separating us from our family and friends; they allow flexible management of our work and leisure time, as well as readjustments of our personal schedules and meetings; and they provide quick and cheap access to knowledge, independent of time and space. Without doubt, mobile devices make our life easier. However, solutions and improvements to existing problems have brought new challenges, leading to continuous reformulation of problems and solutions. For example, mobile communication has gradually altered the boundaries between pub-

el of information society because they complement traditional top-down approaches to decision making, business innovation and societal transformation with emerging bottom-up initiatives. Several episodes around the world illustrate that digital communities have a disruptive power for politics, the economy and society as a whole. In January 2001, one million Filipinos mobilised via SMS to protest again President **Estrada**, who was forced to resign shortly after. Apart from political protests, mobile devices also support other creative forms of swarming behaviour, known as flashmobs. A flashmob is a brief experience of a crowd, which suddenly materialises in an open space and performs an unusual practice or activity before disbanding.

Specifically, MoSoSo enables and empowers digital communities with fluid and rapidly evolving social structures created around a common interest, shared concern or purpose.

DIGITAL communities represent the contemporary form of community, a sociological concept associated with the human need for sharing. The importance of information and communication technologies in our social lives is rendering communities digital because the participation to community life has a key element in the sharing of, and interaction around, digital content. Every time that we add a friend to Facebook, send a text message, share a video in YouTube, express our opinion on our blog or on Twitter, we are actively designing digital communities. By sharing digital content we open up potential social connections, which are later activated once other users react to our initiative.

AT A SOCIETAL level, digital communities contribute to a more sustainable mod-

IN 2006 about 4,000 people, all wearing portable music devices, gathered at the Victoria station in London and at the same time silently all started dancing at the rhythm of their music. Digital communities also offer a way to build resilience in individual lives. A notable recent case is represented by the passengers who managed to complete their journeys in a cheap manner despite the severe airplane service disruption caused by the volcanic ash cloud and the speculations on alternative means of transport. Their solution was an ad hoc car-sharing service, quickly co-created through Facebook, in which users took advantage of their smartphones to manage transport demands and offers in real time. Digital communities also support crowdsourcing, a business model that outsources parts of a project to a crowd with specific characteristics. For instance, citizen journalism is a popular trend thanks to which newspapers and media sites are able to obtain relevant content from their readers quickly and cheaply, such as photos and video clips.

THESE examples demonstrate that mobile devices, powered by MoSoSo, have become powerful social platforms for

grassroots social change. Although interpersonal communication remains the core feature of mobile communication systems, the impact of the emerging practices and growing creative integration of mobiles within the ecosystem of internet and media services cannot be ignored. It is not obvious to predict the future trajectory of mobile technology and its impact on society. Each country will follow its own trajectory; in many of them, the positive vision of synergic activity between public institutions, private organisations, civil society and self-organising digital communities may never come to a reality.

WHEN developing my vision of ideal future society, I of-

ten draw from my experience in Finland, a country built around a few basic values, which are shared by the large majority of the population. The existing homogeneous cultural background represents a common basis on which to establish dialogue and a long-lasting partnership for the desired future. A key enabler is represented by the highly generalised trust supporting a widespread "culture of trust" rather than a "culture of suspect". This element allows openly welcoming contributions from other cultures and experiences coherent with the overall plans for societal and economic development. It is no surprise that one of the main theorists of a creative,

"open source" society is the Finnish philosopher **Pekka Himanen**. This view is supported by the official strategies for the development of the Finnish information society, which aims to realise the goal of "good life in information society" by maintaining "work, family and leisure time in balance". This ambitious goal may be achieved the MoSoSo way, by investing in the empowerment of self-organising digital communities.

Giuseppe Lugano's PhD thesis, 2010: Digital community design: exploring the role of mobile social software in the process of digital convergence. University of Jyväskylä. Available online at: <http://digitalcommunity.cosix.it>

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