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MoSoSo

and the shift towards sustainable consumption

Information and communication technologies can become the key enabler of sustainable information societies.

Global societies are facing multiple unsolved challenges, such as climate change, increasing energy demands and decreasing availability of natural resources, population growth and global ageing. Without mitigation and adaptation strategies in place, these powerful forces in the next few decades may not endanger only natural ecosystems, but also lead to the collapse of existing political and economic systems, thus ultimately putting at risk our existence.



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IT IS TIME TO ACT: Information and communication technologies (ICT) can become the key enabler of sustainable information societies. The technology is already available, but the needed political, economic and socio-cultural infrastructure is way underdeveloped. The public and private sectors successfully managed to realize technological convergence, the coming together of telecommunication systems, computer networks and media industry, but are still far from realizing a policy convergence.

Indeed, their views on the wider purpose of such technological advances in human societies are rather diverging: public institutions promote them as powerful means for realizing a more inclusive, participatory and democratic societies, in which active and responsible citizens are willing to cooperate to address local and global challenges.

On the other hand, private organizations regard technological convergence as a new goldmine supporting new products and services, cost-optimization strategies and innovation processes (e.g. crowd-sourcing). Although there are weak efforts towards reconciling these

different views, achieving this goal is extremely challenging because of the very nature and purpose of public and private stakeholders.

POLICY CONVERGENCE: We cannot expect businesses to modify their profit-oriented nature; however, it will not take long to them to realize that without policy convergence they will not be able to realize the full commercial value of technological convergence.

Policy convergence refers to a set of support policies and mechanisms acknowledging the centrality of users and communities, in their multiple roles of consumers, customers, citizens and entrepreneurs. Effectively supporting all these roles is necessary to find creative and innovative ways of reconciling economic and societal goals, while preserving natural ecosystems.

Obviously, policy convergence implies that digitally networked citizens agree with public and private stakeholders on the same direction of change, otherwise new dramatic divides and tensions will emerge.

GRASSROOTS SOCIAL CHANGE: By combining the disruptive power of social networks with contextual needs and the speed of change and scale achieved through the Internet, mobile social software (MoSoSo) represents a powerful enabler for achieving positive grassroots social change.

MoSoSo refers to a class of mobile applications for informal mobile social networking. MoSoSo is currently synonym of mobile access to online social networks like Facebook, even if location-based services such as Foursquare are gaining popularity. MoSoSo also includes social awareness applications like context-aware social phone-books, which allow sharing one's life-feeds with trusted contacts. Similarly, social proximity applications exploit sensors like Bluetooth for friend-finding, mobile dating or gaming.

Self-organizing communities: MoSoSo needs to be conceived and designed as a general-purpose social platform. Only in this manner, MoSoSo can enable and empower self-organizing digital communities,

fluid social structures in which citizens connect and interact through digital networks to solve a common problem or achieve a shared goal.

Digital communities are not defined by geographic boundaries or existing ties of social solidarity, but rather in terms of compatible interests, values, experiences and lifestyles.

By actively participating in digital communities, people can significantly enhance the resilience of their lives, thus being able to cope more effectively with crises and disruptions of public or private services. A recent case illustrates this concept: when the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud caused an airplane disruption, thousands of passengers used Facebook – a general-purpose social platform – to implement an ad-hoc car-sharing service.

Self-organizing in digital communities of passengers who shared the same destination was an effective means to overcome the uncertainty of the airline service, the scarcity of available cars to rent and the speculations on bus tickets.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE: The persistence of the economic downturn strengthened practices privileging access to ownership. People own thousands of items, but they do not frequently use most of them; on the basis of this premise, the online service Zilok offers a location-based peer-to-peer renting.

Similarly, Swap advertises itself swapping as a way to both save money and the planet. In the area of travelling and tourism, Couchsurfing enhanced traditional hospitality clubs by exploiting Web2.0 technologies

to allow travellers find a couch where to spend the night, and hosts meet interesting people with amazing experiences.

Not only tangible objects can be swapped: indeed, Skillshare promotes local meet-ups of citizens who share their personal expertise, and wish to learn from others. Likewise, political, environmental and consumers' movements like Carrotmobs and Guerrilla Gardening are gaining wide support and spreading around the world.

INFORMAL AND RAPID: As they do not require any formal registration and can rapidly respond to the emerging societal needs, digital communities may extend the participation, scope and importance of existing civil society movements by acting as "glue" between the public and private sectors, and informal networks of citizens. Digital communities are gaining momentum and will soon become widespread, especially when the most dramatic impacts of climate change or oil crisis will appear in the next few years. From this viewpoint, it is clear that MoSoSo should be conceived and designed to allow people "using bits to share atoms", an adaptation strategy to maintain a high level of well-being despite decreasing purchasing power.

In conclusion, public and private stakeholders can significantly contribute to realize more sustainable futures by grounding policy convergence on the acknowledgement of digital communities and the rise of Internet-based sustainable consumption pattern based more on the need for access and sharing knowledge and goods than individual ownership. ■

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