

Designing for Communities

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Abstract

Many observers and practitioners are today engaged in exploring the terrain of the next revolution in Information and Communication Technology, the one following the Personal Computer.

In most cases they are facing this question from a technological perspective: Things that Think (Negroponte, 1995; Gershenfeld, 1997), Tangible Bits (Ishi, Ullmer, 1997), Information Appliances (Norman, 1998), The Invisible Computer (ibidem), Disappearing Computers, Ubiquitous Computing (Weiser, 1991) are some of the visionary names given to innovative research projects trying to look beyond the existing technology.

The above proposals have names where technology is coupled with categories emerging from human perception and/or human environment, creating metaphors suggesting the perspective along which technology can reach a better harmonization with human beings. As a matter of fact, all these proposals still focus on the technology per se, at most taking into account individual users, disregarding or leaving in the background the social dimension of human life.

My experience of researcher engaged in the CSCW (Computer Supported Cooperative Work) field (Schmidt, 1991) and in the i3 (intelligent information interfaces) projects and network launched by the European Community in 1996 () has brought me to adopt a different perspective, paying more attention to the social

they can't do it alone: they must learn to cooperate with technology developers and, mainly, with users of the technology and the social scientists capable to create a deeper understanding of their practice.

Together with Alessandra Agostini and Marco Susani, while he was at Domus Academy, we have developed an approach to the design of systems for communities, called Seductive Design (Agostini et al., 2000), where the three drives (design, user practice and technology) are smoothly combined even if they do not lose their autonomy. This happens if all the members of a project team, whichever it is their competence and culture, periodically interact trying to seduce the others (etymologically: trying to bring them at their part). Seduction from this viewpoint is a matter of listening to the other team members and continuously changing and improving its own proposal so that it can become the proposal of the whole team.

Designing for Communities requires an innovative approach to the design process because it looks for radically new solutions in the systems to be designed. Let me recall some of them, as they have emerged within two projects I have been engaged in during the last three years: Campiello (Agostini et al., 2000, 2000b) and Klee&Co (De Michelis et al., 2000):

- the system must augment the place of its users, making it plastic and flexible;
- the system must create a space where knowledge sharing and communication are strictly coupled, so that documents support conversations and the latter create and transform documents;
- the system should support the interaction of its users in any situation (when they are alone at their workstation, when they are having face-to-face colloquia, when they participate in a meeting, etc.): this requires different presentations in different situations and therefore a clear separation between the knowledge repository and its different interfaces.

More in general, designing for communities requires that the system is designed moving from its interaction to its functions and not, vice versa, from its functions to its interfaces. Moreover, the system should be able to support communities in facing the complexity of the everyday life, where they make the experience of the social life of information (Brown, Duguid, 2000). This requires that they are open, manifold and continuous (De Michelis, 2000, 2000b).

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