

Living beyond technology

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ETHICOMP 2008 had the overall theme of "Living, Working and Learning beyond Technology". In 1995, Rogerson and Bynum wrote, "The information revolution has become a tidal wave that threatens to engulf and change all that humans value. Governments, organisations and individual citizens therefore would make a grave mistake if they view the computer revolution as 'merely technological'. It is fundamentally social and ethical." This issue is still prevalent today. Indeed, Professor Virginio Cantoni of the University of Pavia writes, "In the era of globalisation, it is essential to develop qualities like adaptability and ease of social integration; receptivity towards others; the ability to observe carefully and discover the facts; awareness of the importance of interpersonal relations; critical self-evaluation of outcomes; and the ability to respect deadlines and decisions." We need to consider ICT in context and as a facilitator of social interaction, human endeavour and environmental wellbeing. We must not simply live with ICT but live beyond it.

With the advent of converging technologies we have become more and more dependent on blogs, chat rooms, wikis, podcasts, and so on to interact with each other socially, educationally and professionally. The technology, which in hindsight was so primitive in the 1970s, the decade heralding the Information Age, has become much less primitive, more flexible and more accessible through, for example, Web 2.0, social network sites, Voice over Internet, 2nd Life, mobile communication, wireless / broadband, on-demand multimedia and embedded computer technology coupled with falling unit costs.

The papers at ETHICOMP 2008 provided a rich dialogue about the impact of this less primitive technology. Three contributions illustrate this.

Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Margaryta Anokhina explained that ICT contributes effectively to spreading of all sorts of information, including gossip and rumours. What was interesting was that the old human practice of gossip had taken on a new form in the Information Age. Gossip and rumour resides in public space but the presenters argued that in the Information Age we need to re-think what public space such as working place means in terms of relationships with different degrees of closeness, how interpersonal relationships are configured and implemented and how their architecture shapes their functions and meanings.

The nature of ICT and its impact on accessibility was discussed by Alfreda Dudley. It was argued that to improve access and usage will require significant effort and resources from several sectors: designers, producers, and representatives of citizens and consumers

themselves. In order to move closer towards a level playing field, for all individuals in society, with regards to ICT access, it would take the combined efforts of institutional and community entities to make major structural and policy changes.

In discussing the advance of Second Life, Denise Oram vividly illustrated that ICT is still primitive. She explained that the virtual world has become too far removed from the real world. The virtual world is the world of bits, bytes, records and files, whatever fancy graphics, video, search strategies are used to dress it up. The challenge is to put the real world back into the virtual world. Making a character on a video screen react physically to a ball I throw at it or a rock I throw at it is an issue of bits and bytes. Making it react realistically to an emotional speech I throw at it is the real challenge.

The widening engagement of the ICT evolution from the primitive to the less primitive has seen different groups becoming involved for the first time at different points. First the scientists and philosophers focused on concepts and possibilities, seeking out the truth. Then the technologists, who at first were elitist, took these concepts and developed new forms of ICT. Then followed professional business people and industrialists, who started to embrace ICT, in order to solve increasingly complex problems. Gradually ICT seeped into our everyday lives. It was then ICT-knowledgeable citizens enthusiastically consumed ICT, but then often became sceptical because of failing systems and broken technological promises. Consequently, many citizens today tend to be reasonably realistic about ICT's potential and reliability. Finally, when ICT becomes universally acceptable, accessible, useful, usable and trustworthy it will become invisible. Only then will nearly everyone use this technology without question or concern. We will then live and work beyond technology.

"Living Beyond Technology" does not mean living without it. On the contrary, it means using it without even noticing it. It means, relying upon it without even thinking about it. The better the science and the better the technology, the more unnoticed and reliable technology can become and the more "fit for purpose" it can be.

Note: ETHICOMP 2008 was held at University of Pavia, Mantua, Italy from Wednesday 24 September to Friday 26 September 2008. IMIS was one of the sponsors. Full details of the conference can be found at:

www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk/conferences/ethicomp/ethicomp2008

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