COMMENTARY

# The ONLIFE Initiative—a Concept Reengineering Exercise

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## 1 Background and Process

In February 2012, the European Commission (DG Connect) launched "The ONLIFE Initiative—a Concept Reengineering Exercise" within the context of the Digital Agenda for Europe. Initiated by Nicole Dewandre of the EC and chaired by Luciano Floridi (University of Oxford), scholars from various academic backgrounds were invited to discuss the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on individual, social and public lives. Of particular concern were the policy-relevant consequences of ICT-related developments. Taking Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958)[1] as an initial inspiration, we sought to better understand and articulate the interactions of ICTs with notions of public space in particular and our contemporary lifeworld more generally. As the subtitle "Concept Reengineering Exercise" indicates, the initial focus of this exercise was on re-assessing the conceptual toolbox with which we aim to understand and address these changes. As a prime example of such reengineering, we endorsed Floridi's understanding of "ONLIFE": *contra* strong distinctions between our offline and online lives and experiences that characterized earlier conceptualizations ; "ONLIFE" designates the transformational reality that in contemporary developed societies, with few exceptions, our offline and online experiences and lives are inextricably interwoven (cf. Floridi 2007, 61f.). Once such new

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[1]To begin with, we took the following from the prologue to *The Human Condition* as the opening motto of the *Background Document*. Arendt calls for "… a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears"—vis-à-vis what she observed to be a prevailing thoughtlessness, "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty…" In response, "What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing (Broadbent et al. 2013, 27).

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conceptual foundations were in place, we could then develop concrete, policy-relevant proposals for what would constitute the *good life* in a digital or hyperconnected era. That is, one grounding for the specific proposals articulated in the Manifesto—e.g. care for our attentional capacities, in part as fostered by new digital literacies (see below)— is through virtue ethics and its thematic foci on flourishing, contentment (eudemonia) and harmony.[2] The larger aim was to offer more effective policy guidance for ICT design and deployment.

Our first discussions issued in a background document which identified four transformations:

(a)  "The blurring of the distinction between reality and virtuality"
(b)  "The blurring of the distinctions between human, machine and nature"
(c)  "The reversal from information scarcity to information abundance"
(d)  "The shift from the primacy of entities to the primacy of interactions" (Background document: rethinking public spaces in the digital transition 2013, 30).

Characteristically, considerable controversy and debate marked the path towards eventual agreement on these claims. But once in place, this basic consensus on new and foundational ways of understanding our contemporary realities allowed us to then turn to the following, directly ethical questions:

•  What does it mean to be human in the computational era?
•  How can we experience freedom and plurality in a hyperconnected reality?
•  Is the public/private distinction still relevant?
•  How can we endorse and attribute responsibilities in a world where artefacts become agents?

## 1.1 Results: the ONLIFE Manifesto and Individual Contributions

The results of our subsequent debates and struggles towards agreement are the ONLIFE Manifesto, 13 Individual Contributions, as well as Commentaries on the Manifesto. All these documents are available on the Initiative's website[3] and has been published in revised form (Floridi 2014).

In the ONLIFE Manifesto, we use our four foundational claims about contemporary realities to challenge some core assumptions of modernity and to show how certain views, e.g. regarding the relationship between the human, the natural and the artificial, despite having been debunked in the humanities and social sciences, continue to inform and influence policy making. The Manifesto therefore must also be seen as a critique of core assumptions of modernity in political and legal terms. This critique, however, is neither wholesale nor without nuance: i.e., we are not proposing some sort of simple and exclusive either/or between "modernity" on the one hand and some sort of "postmodernity" on the other. Rather, our critique of modernity focuses on especially

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[2] Such a grounding in part reflects the foundational role of virtue ethics in information and computing ethics from its beginnings (Wiener 1950; for critical commentary, see Floridi 2013, 166ff.)
[3] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-original-outcome (Last Access: May 18th 2014)

a Cartesian-based account of reason as radically divorced from body and as undergirding a mechanistic and atomistic account of nature that will ostensibly give us the capacity for a "command and control" approach to nature. There are a host of well-known critiques of this view and these assumptions in the social sciences and the humanities, beginning at least with early critical responses to high enlightenment. In particular, Ess (2014a) argued that important alternatives to such atomism and materialism begin with Kantian and subsequently Habermasian notions of communicative reason, extending through ecological and feminist ethics, and emerge in especially significant ways in phenomenology and its focus on embodiment as essential to our knowing and navigating the world. Moreover, we draw on diverse philosophical traditions—ranging from Buddhism to feminist theory (e.g. Barad 2007; Code 1987)—that counter the Cartesian atomistic view with strongly relational notions, including relational notions of selfhood, as further reinforced in contemporary social science (cf. Broadbent and Lobet-Maris 2014). The resulting conceptual framework then grounded three specific proposals as positive alternatives to the earlier views, beginning with the *importance in political terms of the relational self*. Secondly, we argued the importance of *supporting a digitally literate society* —but where this new digital literacy is less one-sided than earlier versions. That is, we noted that "endorsing responsibility in a hyperconnected reality requires acknowledging how our actions, perceptions, intentions, morality, even corporality are interwoven with technologies in general, and ICTs in particular" (The Onlife Initiative 2014, 12). As Ess has specifically argued, recognizing our corporality, including the stubbornly *analogue* dimensions of embodied knowledge and navigation of the world, (re)turns us to the now classical forms of literacy as affiliated with writing as a "technology of the self" (Foucault 1988) and what in Medium Theory is more broadly identified as the technologies and literacies of *literacy-print*—where these literacies are further affiliated with notions of (relational) autonomy that appear to be essential to justifying democratic processes and emancipatory norms, including those of equality and gender equality (e.g. Ess 2014b).

These recommendations are closely bound up with a third, namely, the *necessity to care for our attentional capabilities*. As Broadbent and Lobet-Maris (2014) made especially clear, a defining human characteristic is our capacity for not simply "attention", but, in addition, *shared attention*. It appears that much of our unhappiness with contemporary ICTs rests on the multiple ways in which they instrumentalize and commodify both our individual and shared attention. It seems equally clear that our capacities for attention and shared attention are essential for reflecting upon and discerning how we may understand and pursue the good life as a life of contentment and flourishing.

The ONLIFE Manifesto is a jointly written document endorsed by all 13 ONLIFE members, yet the consensus articulated there is not intended to paper over important disagreement and dissent. On the contrary, we encouraged both short *commentaries* to accompany the presentation of the Manifesto on the project website, as well as more extensive *contributions* that constitute the greatest part of the Manifesto publication (Floridi 2014). These are intended to provide an opportunity to clarify one's perspective on the manifesto, to explain some nuances and to offer some critique on specific claims made in the Manifesto. These *contributions* were grouped under four headings: Hyperconnectivity; Identity, Selfhood and Attention; Complexity, Responsibility and Governance; and the Public Sphere in a Computational Era.

In the section on "Hyperconnectivity", Luciano Floridi argues that ICT is placing us in a hyperhistorical context and assesses the implications of the fact that nation states cease being the ultimate informational agents. Jean-Gabriel Ganascia introduces the notion of "Grid Democracy" and describes Wikipedia as a realized utopia. The section on "Identity, Selfhood and Attention" includes the contributions by Charles Ess, Claire Lobet-Maris, Stefana Broadbent and Yiannis Laouris. Laouris addresses two different topics in his contribution: the question of what it means to be alive in a computational era as well as issues around direct democracy. Ess also explores the future of democracy and equality and gives some philosophical background on media usage. In their joint contribution entitled "For a Grey Ecology", Lobet-Maris and Broadbent emphasize the need to protect our human and mental resources in much the same way as green ecology aims to protect natural resources.

In the section on "Complexity, Responsibility and Governance", Ugo Pagallo assesses the political and legal implications of the computational turn and develops a notion of "good onlife governance". Judith Simon focuses on the question of what it means to be a responsible knower in entangled socio-technical systems and offers a critique of the European Commission's *Responsible Research and Innovation* framework. In the section on "The Public Sphere in a Computational Era", Nicole Dewandre argues that while freedom is the purpose of politics, freedom is not about atomistic autonomy, but rather about beginnings ("natality") for human beings as free through their relationships with one another. Both Peter-Paul Verbeek and Mireille Hildebrandt focus on smart environments. While Verbeek argues that developments in ambient intelligence require new understandings of our relationship with such technologies as well as new forms of governance and citizenship, Hildebrandt explores the possibilities of legal protection by design and applies this to the problem of data protection regulation. Finally, Sarah Oates proposes a digital "Bill of Rights", and May Thorseth disentangles notions of reality, virtuality and fictionality in their relation to public use of reason.

## 1.2 The Future of the ONLIFE Initiative

The results of the project were presented during a public event in Brussels on February 8 2013, which was intended as a starting point for a wider discussion—an intention articulated in the Manifesto itself (Broadbent et al. 2013, 5). Beyond subsequent organization of meetings and workshops at various conferences, the major platform for engagement and participation related to the ONLIFE Initiative is the newly established FUTURIUM, an online platform of the Digital Futures project of the European Commission which aims at facilitating a broad reflection on future European policies.[4]

A particularly concrete expression of this trajectory is the recent call by the Commission for proposals under the Horizon 2020 Work Programme for 2014–2015 on the specific topic of a "Human-centric digital age". The proposed research topics directly take up the language and trajectories of the ONLIFE Manifesto, including key topics of "attention scarcity", "the blurring between online and offline world" and the

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[4] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/futurium/en/content/onlife-manifesto-being-human-hyperconnected-era
(Last Access: May 18th 2014)

centrally ethical question, "What are the norms and behaviours that should be considered for behaving ethically and being fair to each other in a hyperconnected digital world?"[5]

Manifestly, the Commission's choice of which projects to support in response to this call will be decisive for the further trajectory of the ONLIFE project.

More broadly, we hope that the initiative and momentum of the ONLIFE project, as instantiated in these recent initiatives of the Commission, will lead to still more ambitious collaborations across even greater ranges of stakeholders. We can envision, for example, new networks of philosophers, social scientists, computer scientists, HCI designers and ICT companies that would aim at nothing less than, first, articulating what a good life in such a hyperconnected, digital era would "look like": such an articulation would draw on the philosophical dimensions of the ONLIFE Manifesto and backgrounds, relevant work in applied ethics, including virtue ethics and information ethics, and so on, as well as from social science research on uses and effects of ICT. All of this would then be tested and refined against the praxis of developing real-world prototypes for new ICT applications explicitly aimed at fostering good lives, e.g. by enhancing our shared attentional capacities rather than instrumentally exploiting them.

Such a vision may sound wildly utopian. To the contrary, however, beyond the ONLIFE project and these recent H2020 initiatives, contemporary developments strongly resonate with and concretely realize this "utopian" vision. For example, Lars Nyre describes a design method for communication media that is explicitly driven by the overtly normative goals of enhancing public spaces for the sake of greater democratic deliberation (Nyre 2014). And at the real-world, industrial-consumer level, the successful design and first sales of the Fairphone (http://www.fairphone.com/) exemplifies in concreto the strongly normative approach to ICT design that is grounded in the Manifesto, i.e. as fostering rather than frustrating human flourishing, especially in spaces of shared attention and the public spaces of democratic societies. Such a vision, in short, is hardly "utopian". Rather, it is both realizable and, from the perspectives of the Manifesto, essential to future developments of ICTs if these are to serve as instruments towards good lives in a digital era—rather than, e.g. solely disposable goods in a consumer society driven by market logics and, as the Snowden revelations make forcefully clear, technologies of our enslavement (cf. Postman 1985).

These developments have crucial implications for philosophers aiming to participate and contribute. In parallel with Nyre's call for media scientists to "get their hands dirty" (our phrase) with the *materiality* of ICTs in collaboration with their colleagues in HCI design (2014), such expansive new networks and collaborations will require us to develop even further those virtues needed to engage in cross-disciplinary dialogues, as we seek to contribute the best insights and critical approaches of applied ethics, epistemology, political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of technology and so on in ways that are intelligible to colleagues both within and beyond the familiar walls of the academy. Simultaneously—and in the Aristotelian spirit of seeking to learn from praxis—we will need to become still more open to critique and insight from unaccustomed sources and approaches, including those prevailing in the real-world levels of industrial design, production and economy. All of this, finally, demands

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[5] http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/95-ict-31-2014.html (Last Access: May 18th 2014)

the virtues of patience and an *epistemological humility* about our own disciplines—a critical virtue that, shall we say, is not often stressed in our profession.

In the Arendtian spirit of natality, we take these first outgrowths from the Manifesto as grounds for optimism that Manifesto's insights and recommendations will continue to flourish and expand their influence in the real world of ICT design, implementation and governance. Insofar as they do so, they promise to offer what we take to be a necessary and salutary contribution to the day-to-day lives of "the rest of us"—all of us whose lives are increasingly shaped and defined by these technologies.

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