Introduction

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On the 8th of February 2013, *The Onlife Manifesto*¹ was released at an inaugural event held in Brussels by DG Connect, the European Commission Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content & Technology.²

The Manifesto was the outcome of the work of a group of scholars, organised by DG Connect, which I had the privilege to chair: Stefana Broadbent, Nicole Dewandre, Charles Ess, Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, Mireille Hildebrandt, Yiannis Laouris, Claire Lobet-Maris, Sarah Oates, Ugo Pagallo, Judith Simon, May Thorseth, and Peter-Paul Verbeek.

During the previous year, we had worked quite intensely on a project entitled *The Onlife Initiative: concept reengineering for rethinking societal concerns in the digital transition*.³ We decided to adopt the neologism “onlife” that I had coined in the past in order to refer to the new experience of a hyperconnected reality within which it is no longer sensible to ask whether one may be online or offline. Also thanks to a series of workshops organised by DG Connect, we had investigated the challenges brought about by the new digital technologies. We had debated the impact that ICTs are having on human life, and hence how one may re-engineer key concepts—such as attention, ownership, privacy, and responsibility—that are essential in order to gain the relevant and adequate framework within which our onlife experience may be understood and improved.

In the course of our investigations, we soon realised that the output of our efforts would have been more fruitful by summarising it in a short document—which soon became known as *The Onlife Manifesto*—and a series of short commentaries

¹ For the English electronic version and the translations of the *Manifesto* in French, German and Italia, please visit <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-manifesto>.

² DG Connect manages *The Digital Agenda* of the EU. For further information see <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/inaugural-event>.

³ The website of the project is available at <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-initiative>.

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(volunteered by some of us) and longer essays (contributed by each of us) that would explain and position *The Manifesto* within the current debates on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

The inaugural event represented the official opening of the public discussion of our work. Many more public meetings and international presentations followed.⁴ As a result, this book is actually a synthesis of the research done in 2012 and the feedback received in 2013.

The book is organised in such a way as to give priority to *The Onlife Manifesto*. This is the document around which the rest of the book revolves. It is followed by eight short commentaries by Ess, my self, Ganascia, Hildebrandt, Laouris, Pagallo, Simon, and Thorseth. The next chapter is the background document. This contains the material that was used to start and frame the conversations during the initial phases of the project. There follow 12 chapters. In them, members of the group, myself included, have presented some of the ideas that guided our contribution to the *Manifesto*. Although each chapter may be read independently of the rest of the book, it is a modular part of the scaffolding that led to the *Manifesto*. A short conclusion, which is more a “to be continued”, ends the book. In terms of authorship, any material that is not explicitly attributed to some author is to be attributed to the whole group, as a collaborative work, endorsed by each of us.

So much for the outline of the project. I shall not add any further details because these can be found in the background document. In terms of an overview of the book’s contents, in the following pages we argue that the development and widespread use of ICTs are having a radical impact on the human condition. More specifically, we believe (see the Preface that introduces *The Manifesto*) that ICTs are not mere tools but rather environmental forces that are increasingly affecting:

1. our self-conception (who we are);
2. our mutual interactions (how we socialise);
3. our conception of reality (our metaphysics); and
4. our interactions with reality (our agency).

In each case, ICTs have a huge ethical, legal, and political significance, yet one with which we have begun to come to terms only recently.

We are also convinced that the aforementioned impact exercised by ICTs is due to at least four major transformations:

- a. the blurring of the distinction between reality and virtuality;
- b. the blurring of the distinction between human, machine and nature;
- c. the reversal from information scarcity to information abundance; and
- d. the shift from the primacy of stand-alone things, properties, and binary relations, to the primacy of interactions, processes and networks.

The impact summarised in (1)–(4) and the transformations behind such an impact, listed in (a)–(d), are testing the foundations of our philosophy, in the following

⁴ For a description see <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/onlife-news>. Other meetings are listed here: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/past-meetings>.

sense. Our perception and understanding of the realities surrounding us are necessarily mediated by concepts. These work like interfaces through which we experience, interact with, and semanticise (in the sense of making sense of, and giving meaning to), the world. In short, we grasp reality through concepts, so, when reality changes too quickly and dramatically, as it is happening nowadays because of ICTs, we are conceptually wrong-footed. It is a widespread impression that our current conceptual toolbox is no longer fitted to address new ICT-related challenges. This is not only a problem in itself. It is also a risk, because the lack of a clear conceptual grasp of our present time may easily lead to negative projections about the future: we fear and reject what we fail to semanticise. The goal of *The Manifesto*, and of the rest of the book that contextualises, is therefore that of contributing to the update of our conceptual framework. It is a constructive goal. We do not intend to encourage a philosophy of mistrust. On the contrary, this book is meant to be a positive contribution to rethinking the philosophy on which policies are built in a hyperconnected world, so that we may have a better chance of understanding our ICT-related problems and solving them satisfactorily. Redesigning or reengineering our hermeneutics, to put it more dramatically, seems essential, in order to have a good chance of understanding and dealing with the transformations in (a)–(d) and hence shape in the best way the novelties in (1)–(4). It is clearly an enormous and ambitious task, to which this book can only aspire to contribute.

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