

Background Document: Rethinking Public Spaces in the Digital Transition

The Onlife Initiative

What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.

Hannah Arendt, Prologue of “The Human Condition”, 1958.

The deployment of ICTs and their uptake by society affect radically the human condition, insofar as it modifies our relationships to ourselves, to others, and to the world. This digital transition shakes established reference frameworks, which impact the public space, politics itself, and societal expectations toward policy making. The Onlife Initiative intends to explore these impacts within the policy context of the Digital Agenda for Europe.

1 What do we Mean by Concept Reengineering?

There is no such thing as a neutral apprehension of reality. Philosophy tells us that we grasp the world around us through concepts. Even when we think that we are representing our environment in a specular or objective way, our perception is necessarily mediated by concepts, as if they were the keyholes through which we inevitably see and perceive reality. Concepts show their efficacy by providing us with an understanding of our surrounding realities and a means by which we are able to grasp those realities.

Knowledge aggregates around given concepts, and paradigmatic shifts happen when new concepts are designed, taken up, adapted or re-adapted, thereby providing a new basis for knowledge accumulation and for the production of a new sense of meaning (semanticisation).

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Concept reengineering is an activity that aims at putting ourselves in the best position to reflect meaningfully on what happens to us, and thereby help us envision the future in positive terms. The dominance of negative projections about the future is often the signature of the inadequacy of our current conceptual toolbox. We fear and reject what we fail to understand and semanticise. So, the overall purpose of this concept reengineering exercise is to acknowledge such inadequacy and explore alternative conceptualisations that may enable us to re-envision the future with greater confidence.

It is acknowledged that, collectively, we are undergoing a deep crisis, the expression of which is apparent in economic, social, environmental, and financial terms. In a less obvious manner, but equally, if not even more significantly, the crisis affects the public space, politics itself, and how we conceptualise both ourselves and the world as well as our mutual interactions. Through the concept reengineering exercise, we intend to focus on the issue of public spaces and put philosophy in practice within the realm of policy making.

Sources of inspiration and references will be multiple and diverse, but the notion of public space underlying this proposal is greatly inspired by, if not borrowed from, Hannah Arendt. Her vision rests on the fact that politics emerge from the plurality and that the public space is the space lying between us, where each of us can experience freedom. If that space between-us collapses, and if politics becomes only a means to an end (whatever good this end pretends to be), then we are not far from totalitarianism, she argues. She invites us to dissociate ourselves from the illusion that the most efficient way to make society good is to make each of its members a good person. To Jonas, who held this view, she replied: “if this was true, then we are lost!”¹ And indeed, as humans, we all experience the internal dialogue between good and bad. That we need sometimes to make this polarized figure external can be part of building our collective identity, but we should not fool ourselves by thinking that we can really strive, through politics, to make each human a unequivocally good being. For that reason, this exercise will focus on what matters for the public space, rather than what matters for each individual, or, in other words, it will focus on the means and preconditions needed to reinvigorate the sense of plurality which is essential if each of us is to experience freedom in this hyperconnected era².

To the best of our knowledge, this experience of putting philosophy into practice is a genuinely new one, but should this not be the case, lessons will be drawn from similar past experiences. This is also part of the exercise.

¹ TV broadcast discussion, Toronto, 1972 reported in “Edifier un monde, Interventions 1971–1975”, Hannah Arendt, p. 98, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2007.

² “If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy, they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs—in its grandeur and misery—the object of their *thaumadzein*. Biblically speaking, they would have to accept—as they accept in speechless wonder the miracle of the universe, of man, and of being—the miracle that God did not create Man, but ‘male and female created He them.’ They would have to accept in something more than the resignation of human weakness the fact that ‘it is not good for man to be alone.’” Arendt (1990).

2 What do we Mean by the Digital Transition?

Let's call digital transition the societal process arising from the deployment and uptake of ICTs. In a remarkable article "*The computer for the 21st century*", published in the Scientific American in September 1991, Mark Weiser suggested that, after the mainframe and the personal desktop computer, the next step will be ubiquitous computing, i.e. a technology that has become so pervasive that it is invisible to us and totally embedded in our lives. In their recent book, Dourish and Bell³ argue that we have already entered into the era of ubiquitous computing, rather than seeing it as something that may happen in the future. The ETICA research project⁴ has identified a list of emerging ICTs⁵ that are bringing new, ethical concerns. In fact, together with the current burgeoning of devices, sensors, robots, and applications, and these emerging technologies, we have entered a new phase of the information age, a phase where the hybridisation between bits and other forms of reality is so deep that it radically changes the human condition in profound ways. The ubiquitous computing vision is a reasonable asymptotic view, which can be taken as the current background against which society is striving to actualise its norms, values and codes of behaviour.

3 Why Such an Exercise in the Realm of the Digital Agenda?

The digital transition shakes established reference frameworks in, at least, four ways:

- a. blurring the distinction between reality and virtuality;
- b. by blurring the distinctions between human, machine and nature;
- c. by reversing from scarcity to abundance, when it comes to information;
- d. by shifting from the primacy of entities over interactions to the primacy of interactions over entities.

If not well considered, these issues push us back and forth between distrust and blind faith: none of these two are able to ground a good public life and provide meaning. As a society, we are confronted with a learning challenge of how to actively shape our lives in this technologically-mediated world.

Let us consider these four issues in turn.

³ Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell, *Divining a digital future: mess and mythology in ubiquitous computing*, MIT Press, 2011.

⁴ Ethical issues of emerging ICT applications. <http://moriarty.tech.dmu.ac.uk:8080/index.jsp?page=10516>.

⁵ List of technologies: affective computing, ambient intelligence, artificial intelligence, bioelectronics, cloud computing, future internet, human-machine symbiosis, neuroelectronics, quantum computing, robotics, virtual/augmented reality.

3.1 The Blurring of the Distinction Between Reality and Virtuality

Plato's allegory of the cave, the distinction between body and mind, or that between internal fantasies and actual behaviours are fundamental and ancestral dichotomies through which we think and act. They are three among many other expressions of the dualist way of thinking. Philosophers have argued that these dichotomies are fragile and more illusory than one may think. However, dualist thinking remains a pillar of common sense and of the moral and political experience. By making virtuality more real than ever before, the digital transition undermines the real/virtual divide, and thereby all dualist forms of thinking. This calls for new framings of several issues, either through monism, a new dualism, or pluralism. Cognitive sciences can usefully complement the philosophical perspective with a scientific account of the link between the different ways of thinking (in pluralist, dualist or monist terms) and behaviours.

In concrete terms, exploring these issues will shed light, for example, on the level of continuity in behavioural and moral terms that should be expected in the virtual and the physical public spaces. For example, anthropologists tell us that it is common practice for people to lie about themselves on the internet, not necessarily for bad reasons, but rather as a social practice: minors and dating adults lie about their age, appearance, interests, and so forth. Is this really affecting trust or, on the contrary, is it part of the acculturation of ICT tools by society, producing the shadow areas that any individual needs to live as a human? Another issue relates to where one should draw the line between real and virtual when it comes to committing crimes, such as murder or rape? At the physical end, it is and must be strictly forbidden and severely punished. At the virtual end, when dealing with a mere solitary game, it can be considered as being part of the private sphere and tolerated as part of one's own deep intimacy. Yet, there is a middle ground between these two ends (social gaming, avatars, web-dating etc.), and it is not trivial to draw the line between the space where public morality has to apply and the space where inner dialogues and negotiations take place.

3.2 The Blurring of the Distinctions Between People, Nature and Artefacts

Once upon a time, it was easy to distinguish people from artefacts and nature. The blurring of the distinction has been increasing since Darwin and the industrial era. After Darwin, we acknowledge that we are part of nature, in full continuity with animals. Since the industrial era, artefacts and nature have become intrinsically connected, through the metabolism of the industrial development, which is drawing on natural resources. More recently, with the use of medical devices, human beings and artefacts have also connected.

The digital transition acts as a huge accelerator of the blurring of these once effective distinctions. The multiplication of sensors and prostheses, the progress of cognitive sciences and biological engineering blur the distinction between humans and artefacts. The multiplication of artefacts, the intensification of industrial development on the whole planet and the increase of monitoring means we may not exhaust the planet, which will pursue its course in the universe, but it surely exhausts the notion of blank nature or of an endless reservoir.

This means that our conceptual toolbox, still reliant on these once effective distinctions between humans, nature and artefacts, needs to adapt to this new reality, where these distinctions no longer exist. What impact does this have on policy making in the ethical domain? What impact does it have on the framing of the sustainability challenge in a prospective way?

3.3 The Reversal from Scarcity to Abundance, when it Comes to Information

The common sense vision on knowledge and information is underlined by the omniscience/omnipotence utopia. The assumption is that, if only we knew everything that there is to know, we would act perfectly, or, alternatively, that mistakes and wrong doings could be attributed to a lack of knowledge. This, again, has been challenged by some schools of thought for some time, but is now becoming commonplace. Indeed, we are orphans of the encyclopaedic ideal and subject to the new experience that the binding constraint is not our knowledge, but instead our attention capacity. Information, and even knowledge, is like what *used to be* a natural resource: plentiful. We have shifted our sense of boundlessness from natural resources (now recognized as finite quantities) to information and knowledge. Indeed, with the digital transition, there are fewer and fewer activities that do not produce a “digital shadow”. All the electronic devices we engage with (portable or not) leave a recorded trace: where we are, what we read, what we buy, not to mention the information we post about ourselves on social networks or blogs. Information is akin to natural resources of a third kind, besides the non-renewable and the renewable, we have the exponential. Instead of aiming at a global or encyclopaedic overview, we need to learn to navigate through information-saturated waters, and make sense of and value the abundance of information through data-mining and other filtering activities. This radical mental shift has consequences on our behaviours as knowers, in our collective representation of what knowledge and information are, on the link between knowledge and action (consider the veil of ignorance) and also, more concretely, on the framing of the fundamental right to privacy, as the current principles of control and data minimisation on which the privacy framework is built fail to grasp optimally the new societal concerns regarding privacy, reputation and image.

3.4 The Reversal from Entity's Primacy Over Interactions to Interactions' Primacy Over Entities

We tend to pay more attention to what entities are, or should become, and consider the interactions between them as secondary. For example, we focus on defining what the EU should be, trying to “overcome fragmentation”—as we (too) often put it—in order to construct a coherent whole. By framing the issue in this way, we consider fragmentation as a negative and, as a corollary, consider unity as superior to fragmentation. Similarly, in our framing of relations with others, we often speak in binary terms: barriers (to be lifted), or walls (to be erected), for example. Thereby, we fail to pay proper attention to the quality and healthiness of interactions and relations between entities.

We are too often inclined to think that the solution to our problems lies in greater leadership, or in upscaling power or control. In fact, sustainability rhetoric points to the need to rebalance the relationship to the self (focus on identity) with the relationship to the other (focus on interactions). Achieving both more integration and more diversity can only be done with a relaxed approach to identity and a constructive approach to otherness⁶. With the digital transition, the importance of interfaces and interoperability is central. The primacy of interactions becomes a matter of fact, and identity is to be seen as the result of all interactions, instead of as a control variable. One of the practical implications of this mental shift is to pay less attention to size, to minimise narcissist concerns, to go beyond the fragmentation diagnostic and to analyse instead how the quality and efficiency of interactions can be improved to serve the overall purpose.

4 Process and Outcome

The goal of the exercise is threefold:

1. to check whether there were similar exercises in the past, and if applicable, draw lessons from them;
2. to validate or adapt the set of issues that should be considered⁷;
3. to consider each validated issue, by giving the following account:
 - i. examine the consequences of the shifts, paying particular attention to the examples on the notion of public space and on the expectations towards public authorities.
 - ii. sketch recommendations on new issue framings with a view to enhancing the policy-grip on what sustains and reinvigorates the public space and really matters to citizens.

⁶ For an extensive presentation of this argument, please refer to Dewandre (2011).

⁷ The choice of issues proposed under section 3 is highly contingent, and should not be perceived as exhaustive nor exclusive but rather as a proposal to trigger the process.

The Onlife Group has worked over 2012 and has chosen to deliver the outcome of this process in the form of an Onlife Manifesto. Indeed, it quickly appeared in the process that although the background of each member was different, there was a strong common basis, which was worth spelling out.

The *Onlife Manifesto* is the core output of this initiative, around which all members have gathered and consider a useful piece for triggering debates.

As may be easily understood, agreeing on a common engaging text has not been an easy task for such a multidisciplinary group! In order to enable each member to position him or herself relatively to the Manifesto, each contributor had the possibility to write *Commentaries* on the Manifesto. This generated a cloud of nuances and unveils the multiple perspectives under which this text can be read and understood.

Finally, each member wrapped up in a *Chapter* his or her contribution to the debate.

As suggested by the flower on the webpage, the Manifesto, the Commentaries and the Chapters form an output, which reflects both a strong common ground and a rich diversity. We hope that this material will be helpful and perhaps inspiring.

The outcome of this process will be the beginning of a wider discussion, both in meetings and through *Futurium*. *Futurium* is a vital tool aimed at encouraging participation from a wide range of actors, providing an open and interactive space for an inclusive thinking process. Participation from civil society groups, ICT professionals, and any individual who wish to join the debate is encouraged. Those interested in hosting workshops to discuss this outcome are invited to send in proposals addressed to nicole.dewandre@ec.europa.eu.

Keeping the initiative moving and focused has been ensured by Luciano Floridi, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information at the University of Oxford, Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, and Fellow of St Cross College, Oxford; Charles Ess, Professor in Media Studies, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo; and Nicole Dewandre, advisor on societal issues at the Directorate General Communications Networks, Content, and Technology, of the European Commission, respectively chair, editor, and rapporteur. At the same time, this would not have been possible without the remarkable engagement of all members, nor with the most efficient support of Roua Abbas, Igor Caldeira, and Nicole Zwaaneveld.

This initiative⁸ is part of the *Digital Futures* project.

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⁸ The content of this initiative does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the members of the Onlife group.

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