

Editorial: On IRIE Vol. 16

What will go online next? That is a question many people ask for very different reasons. And the answers the short history of the internet has given to this question during the last years were very different as well. Different from what we expected. And even different from what we thought that would be possible to go online. Social relationships are a very good example for that. When the first connection between computers via the telephone net was established in 1969 and the word 'login' was wired from Stanford to UCLA (apparently the connection crashed on the letter 'g') no one has dreamt of a network that would be able to build and reflect social relationships. But exactly that is what social networks in the internet do. And don't get it wrong. It is not that social networks extended one's relationships to the net, made it easier to foster them or allow for a more efficient communication within relationships. It is the relationships themselves that went online and exist in and are constituted by the networks. Or, in allusion to McLuhan: 'The medium is the relationship'.

Social networks essentially consist of representations of their users (often a profile), his/her social links and a variety of additional services to facilitate the exchange of information between them. Most online social networks are web based and provide means for users to interact over the internet, such as e-mail (often in-build services), postings of various media content (pictorial, film, audio, textual etc.) and instant messaging. Although online communities are sometimes considered as a kind of online social network in a broader sense, online social networks usually mean an individual-centred service whereas online communities are group-centred. Such group-centred networks go back to 1979 when the first usenets were built. They were theme based and mainly impersonal. Social networks are very different.

Social networking sites allow users to share their personal ideas, activities, events, and interests with 'friends' – yes, in quotes as the meaning of friend did change from a very intimate one-to-one relationship to a connection established in a social network. The main types of social networking services are those which contain category places (such as former school-year or classmates), means to connect with friends (usually with self-description pages) and a recommendation system linked to trust. Popular methods now combine many of these; the most popular are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. Over the last few years, online social network sites became the most important phenomenon in the internet, in particular the explosion of Facebook, brought these new communicative ways to the edge of public opinion.

Accordingly, online social networks raise a variety of ethical and political concerns. Some of them are rather classical ones like privacy, access to information, potential for misuse, risk for child safety or censorship. Some of them are rather new like trolling, cyber bullying and cyber stalking or identity theft. And as usual the opinion is voiced loudly that relationships are compromised by the development outlined above and deteriorate increasingly. Thus, we see it as our foremost duty to first analyze, understand and explain the development before taking a moral stand. And we think this issue can shed some light on the questions concerned and bring some rationality into the debate. In any case we hope that it can contribute to your academic reasoning on the subject and we would be more than glad if it contributes to the fostering of our relationship as editors, authors and readers, as members of the academic community doing research in Information Ethics.

With regards to this we would like to introduce 2 new forms of publication that we want to offer in the future: Opinion Papers and Comments/Letters to the Editor:

- **Opinion Papers** will provide readers with focused coverage of topical issues in Information Ethics, which are of high current interest and potential. They need not fit into the subject of a current issue. We rather publish them with regards to their topicality. Thus, such Opinion Papers should be limited in length (~1.500 words including references) and need not take all relevant literature into account.
- **Comments/Letters to the Editor:** Comments/Letters to the Editor can be submitted anytime. They may not exceed 500 words and should focus on a specific article published in the current issue of IRIE. The authors of the article cited will be invited to reply. Letters and replies will be published simultaneously.

We are very happy to have already two very interesting Opinion Papers in this issue. And we do invite and encourage you to make further use of these additional offerings and look forward to your upcoming contributions.

And finally you may have noticed that we changed the format of the publication from two to one column; not because we changed our aesthetic concept. It is the technological development that triggered this modification. We were induced to the fact that the format consisting of two columns is not readable very well on e-book readers. Thus, while this kind of device is becoming more and more common on the one side and on the other side, it seems not to make any significant difference to classical readers if the format is not two columned anymore, we do not want to further disregard the needs of the users of these new kind of displays. If you disagree send us a comment and if you agree please let us know as well.

Sincerely yours,

The editors.