

## Digital communities on the move

Gerfried Stocker / Andreas Hirsch

Prix Ars Electronica's new Digital Communities award was developed by Gerfried Stocker and Andreas Hirsch. Media artist Stocker is one of the managing directors of the Ars Electronica Center and artistic co-director of the festival since 1996, while Andreas Hirsch, a specialist in conceiving and engineering cultural systems, serves as a member of the jury of the Digital Communities Category. In their *receiver* contribution, the two examine digitally enabled communication as a social system: can the Internet, being reclaimed as social space and merging its powers with the wireless connectivity of mobile phones, create a major shift towards a new quality in human social innovation?

Ars Electronica

<http://www.aec.at/>

Andreas Hirsch's electrolyte.net

<http://flow.electrolyte.net/index.html>

Not for the first time in its history the Internet seems to be undergoing a major change, a change that could even be called a shift, which has many parents or midwives. But will it be a shift for the good this time? Signs of change are visible and discussed everywhere, ranging from "Weblogmania" to "WikiWebphoria". While some forms seem to stay and gather real momentum, others pop up as the craze of the day and then disappear again after mass media started picking them up, like FlashMobs. But in changing contexts, when things get serious, FlashMobs might transform into mobile groups of demonstrators against both war and terrorism and coordinated via SMS. Who knows what will become of such phenomena, and what will come next?

What gives those observations significance beyond the craze of the day is the fact that most of the emerging phenomena in the field we are looking at are in one way or other related to aspects of society – they are about forming communities or taking collective action. So what is actually happening? Is the Internet finally coming of age? Indeed, it appears that the Internet is being reclaimed as a social space and at almost the same time it – after many announcements – finally and actually is going "mobile".

The qualities of the Internet as a social space had in fact been an important part of its appeal in the early days, then of course also due to the comparative smallness of the user base, a grassroots optimism that later on had gotten somewhat out of fashion during the years of the dotcom boom and – this should not be overlooked – certain core values literally coded into the basic protocols (still) running the Internet.

New phenomena of community building and social innovation now form around these values of trust and sharing and find their basis in what has been coined as "Social Software". Almost like a by-product to supporting group-forming processes, Social Software seems to bring certain aspects of the Internet to full blossom: Blogging lets the active use of the hypermedium finally seem like human's second nature and WikiWebs magically structure the babylodge of voices in multithreaded discussion forums and mailing lists into a form of collective action that produces results that are easily useable by others while remaining subject to further transformation.

Blogs, see boingboing  
<http://www.boingboing.net>

The basis for such developments was a certain maturing of views that Clay Shirky sums up like this: "We have historically overestimated the value of network access to computers, and underestimated the value of network access to other people, so we spent much more time on the technical rather than social problems of software used by groups" (*Social Software and the Politics of Groups*, March 2003, p. 4).

Clay Shirky's site  
<http://www.shirky.com>

Responsible for connectivity to become "mobile" and increasingly device-independent are several innovations in wireless technology, such as third-generation mobile phone standards, wireless local area networks and the advancement of ever smaller hardware bringing us steadily closer to the vision of truly wearable computing and allowing us to arrive at Barry Wellman's vision that "the person – not the place, household or workgroup – will become even more of an autonomous communication node" (Barry Wellman quoted after Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs – The Next Social Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass, 2003, p. 57f).

Smart Mobs  
<http://www.smartmobs.com>

Howard Rheingold's site  
<http://www.rheingold.com>

But this is only partially the basis for a further emergence of social phenomena around mobile connectivity that Howard Rheingold analyses in his latest book *Smart Mobs* with a combination of sober enthusiasm and an emphatically critical view on the inherently ambivalent potentials

of technology for good and evil: "Now that the virtual world's power to connect interest groups is untethering from the desktop and merging its power with the ubiquitous wireless connectivity of mobile telephones, new forms of collective action are electing and deposing world leaders and triggering global epidemics of urban performance art" (Howard Rheingold, in an email to the authors).

The shift, being reflected in some of those observations, contains social innovation that is going beyond the mere introduction of technological achievements and the adopting of new cultural techniques. That shift has significant social and political dimensions, it affects both our understanding of the communities that we live in – both on- and offline – and a rising awareness of certain core elements of human development that seem to have reached a critical stage: the right to innovate and to share creativity, the yawning of a digital divide across societies, our freedoms in cyberspace as an integral part of human freedoms and the future of democracy.

Luckily, awareness for the vital fight for our rights in cyberspace is not new, and it is due to the tireless work of numerous people, not least the team of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), which is pointing out critical developments and fighting exemplary legal cases. This fight has gained sad additional momentum and importance in the light of restrictive policies around the world and a perception of darkening horizons of world politics quite a while before September 11th 2001. The current developments show not only numerous "divides" running across the earth, but also point to the often cited "Digital Divide" that in fact is not one divide but a multitude of divides running across all societies in terms of gender as well as social group or ethnicity. The "Digital Divide" is part of a world that in pessimistic moments might be pictured as – on local as well as global scales – drifting ever deeper into conflict day by day. But there is hope, and this lies in the fact that across the world initiatives and digital community projects from different backgrounds are contributing to making the "Digital Divide" narrower and narrower and digital inclusion more of a reality every day.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation  
<http://www.eff.org>

Divides can also be found in the understanding of what democracy actually is or should be. Democratic procedures and forms of collective decision making are again the object of intense debates in communities ranging from neighbourhood communities to special interest groups or the various forms of activism. Such a growing critical self-awareness of democratic processes does not arrive without reason. In fact, the future of democracy itself is at stake today; it has reached a position of stalemate that Joichi Ito describes thus: "Traditional forms of representative democracy are barely able to

manage the scale, complexity and speed of the issues in the world today. Representatives of sovereign nations negotiating with each other in the global dialog are very limited in their ability to solve global issues. The monolithic media and its increasingly simplistic representation of the world cannot provide the competition of ideas necessary to reach consensus" (*Emergent Democracy*, March 2003, p. 15).

Joichi Ito's site  
<http://joi.ito.com>

Ito – collaborating with others on this by using a WikiWeb – has been working on a concept of "Emergent Democracy", promoting a new understanding of democracy that – together with insight from the likes of Steve Coleman and others on the risks and opportunities of "electronic democracy" – serves as a contribution to the future of democracy and is adding to hopes for a lighter future than the one indicated above.

An essential element of communities is the forming and defending of a "commons", a common ground of shared goods that all members of a community contribute to and can make use of. The Internet itself – if we look at its core values and basic protocols mentioned earlier – was essentially intended and can still be seen as such a "commons", while not without limitations, we should add today. Among the elements of human development at stake today is the existence of that "digital commons" that is threatened by changes in the protocols and the openness of the Internet itself, by legal regulations notably in the area of patent and copyright laws. This situation touches on the freedom to be creative and to share creativity and the freedom to invent, as Howard Rheingold points out: "The freedom to invent and to use media to organize collective action is at stake. Whether we retain these freedoms is uncertain" (*The Battle over Control of Code is a Battle over Freedom*, 2003, p. 42, in Catalogue Ars Electronica).

The situation indeed seems dramatic, but again there is also hope: authors such as Rheingold (with his books on *The Virtual Community*, 1993, and on *Smart Mobs*, 2003) and Lawrence Lessig (with his books on *Code* and on *The Future of Ideas*) have made significant contributions to the awareness of these issues. With the project of a "Creative Commons License", Lessig has entered the field of practical solutions and applied political work.

Creative Commons License  
<http://creativecommons.org>

Lawrence Lessig  
<http://www.lessig.org>

All those developments add up to the perception of a major shift in social innovation and the role of communities both online and offline. Together with experiences from the Ars Electronica Festival in 2002, devoted to the topic "Unplugged – Art as the Scene of Global Conflict", these factors have led us to the understanding that the time is ripe for introducing a new category to the Prix Ars Electronica, which over the last 17 years has been established as the foremost international prize for digital arts. The new category – named "Digital Communities" – is dedicated to projects of great socio-political relevance, ranging from Digital Community Projects to Social Software and also includes scientific or journalistic works that help advance our understanding of the phenomena just described. The birth of this new category was made possible with the help of SAP, a global technology company, as sponsor, and the cooperation of the UNESCO DigiArts Program and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). We were lucky to be able to involve some of the most outstanding experts in the field, such as Howard Rheingold, Oliviero Toscani, Joichi Ito, Jane Metcalfe, Dorothy Okello and Shanthi Kalathil, to help us judge the entries in this new category. All the critical areas related to human communities that we were able to touch upon in this brief account of the situation – Digital Divide, Creative Commons or eDemocracy – play a role in the projects entered for the Digital Communities category of Prix Ars Electronica 2004. Digital Communities are on the move; they have become mobile not only technologically, but also socially and mentally, embracing new forms of collective action emerging every day.

Winners of the Digital Communities category 2004

<http://www.aec.at/en/prix/communities/communities.asp>

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