EDITORIAL PREFACE

Social Interaction Technology in Context

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During the last decade, the population of Internet users around the globe has grown to over 2.4 billion, according to the Internet Usage and World Population Statistics.[1] Surveys of global social media point at the arrival of the age of social dynamics, social contact, and social experiences (Universal McCann, 2013). Various aspects of communication technologies are becoming increasingly scrutinized by social scientists, policy makers, marketers, business owners, and social commentators alike. The current issue of the *International Journal of Interactive Systems and Technologies* offers an analysis of the use of social interaction technologies in different contexts, including community revitalization efforts in urban areas, physical activity, education, and legal situations involving social media.

The opening article, "*Connecting Real and Virtual Neighbors: The Interplay Between Physical Space, Civic Journalism, and Online Community*" by Robin Blom, Jonathan S. Morgan, Paul Zube, and Brian J. Bowe reports on a community action research project in the City of Detroit. A former great American industrial center, Detroit has recently turned into a potent metaphor for the ambiguous effects of the information revolution on local communities that had prospered during the booming decades of the traditional manufacturing (Fukuyama, 1999). As regional economic systems continue to adjust to a drastic decline in employment in America's manufacturing sector and the ongoing globalization of markets, Detroit has lost more than half of its residents since the 1950s (Solomon, 2014). Once known as a "capitalist dream town of unrivaled innovation and bountiful reward"[2] and the "veritable Silicon Valley of its day",[3] Detroit became the largest American city to file for bankruptcy (Bowen, 2014). Charlie LeDuff (2013), a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter summarizes the importance of Detroit in contemporary discourse about the future of America as a democratic project, arguing "Detroit is America's city. It was the vanguard of our way up, just as it as the vanguard of our way down. And one hopes the vanguard of our way up again. Detroit is Pax Americana…" (p. 4).

Different measures are discussed to remedy Detroit's woes, and among them are strengthening local communities and revitalizing neighborhoods where the media can play a part. *The Detroit News,* along with *The San*

Francisco Chronicle, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The News-Press* (Fort Myers, Florida), *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times*, was one of the first among metro dailies to initiate hyperlocal-type, neighborhood-oriented news coverage. The project described by Blom et al. was built around the "Going Home" blog hosted by *The Detroit News*, and aimed to mobilize people living in an east-side inner city Detroit neighborhood and connect the geographically separated social groups of current and former residents. Over time, the blog progressed from a bulletin-board type of community publication to a catalyst of positive social change in the neighborhood. The results of the study confirm that blogs can be used to facilitate community organizing and neighborhood revitalization. The authors suggest that by empowering neighborhoods with a voice, blogging can serve local communities in a civically relevant way: It can energize already involved community members while bringing aboard the uninvolved.

The authors of the next article focus on leisure-time physical activity and seek to find a cost-effective way to collect large-scale data sets for analyzing physical activity without relying on research participants. Jeroen Stragier, Peter Mechant, and Lieven De Marez in an exploratory project, titled "*Studying Physical Activity Using Social Media: An Analysis of the Added Value of RunKeeper Tweets*," explore the degree to which raw data from mobile fitness applications (MFAs) exchanged on Twitter can be used for studying physical activities such as running, walking, and cycling. Based on the results of a content analysis of 2,868 tweets, the authors maintain that the data obtained from MFAs and distributed via social networking sites can provide valuable information on various aspects of physical activity including timing and distance of runs, bicycle rides, and walks.

The article by Diana Pérez Marín and Carlos Caballero entitled "*Using Conceptual Models to Implement Natural Language Pedagogic Agent-Student Conversations*" investigates the intricacies of incorporating pedagogic conversational agents in interactive learning environments. The authors emphasize that the introduction of natural language interaction technologies allows for maintaining conversations between the student and the computer in a human-like manner. The study applies an agent-based approach to design a procedure for using a student modeling mechanism to guide the agent-student dialog. The use of specific features of animated pedagogic agents is discussed along with the advantages of utilizing a knowledge representation format for enabling agent-student interaction.

Joshua Azriel and Charles Mayo, in "*Historic Times v. Sullivan and Gertz v. Welch Supreme Court Decisions and Online Social Media Libel Law*," re-examine the relevance of two iconic U.S. Supreme Court decisions: the 1964 *Times v. Sullivan* and the 1974 *Gertz v. Welch* in terms of legal issues associated with the explosion of social media. The article provides an overview of recent legal cases related to social media that apply actual malice standards in libel claims. The analysis is particularly timely in light of the 50th and 40th anniversaries of these landmark Supreme Court rulings. The authors argue that both U.S. Supreme Court decisions, Times v. Sullivan and Gertz v. Welch, are pertinent in the digital era and applicable in today's legal controversies related to social media.

Next, Ligaya Scaff provides an overview of the Annual Conference of the Eastern Communication Association, the oldest professional communication organization in the United States, held in Pittsburgh on April 24-28, 2013. As both a conference presenter and attendee, Scaff shares her observations and reflects on research themes, discoveries, and challenges. The diversity of scholarly inquiries at the confluence of communication and technology confirms the importance of identifying the latest technology trends and evaluating their impact on society. A review of "*Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*" (Polity Press, 2013) concludes this issue of the *International*

Journal of Interactive Communication Systems and Technologies. Pamela E. Walck offers a balanced account of Dhiraj Murthy's book, which focuses on the intricacies of technology-mediated communication in the age of Twitter. Walck believes that this book serves as an avenue for a conversation about the influence of new communication platforms on public opinion, social activism, and citizen participation. "It demonstrates perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing mass communication scholars today: keeping abreast of technology even as it is evolving," concludes Walck.

As the social features of communication technologies continue to amplify, the assertion that the Internet has become an indispensable part of modern society remains valid, and the way to move forward is by embracing new technologies (McKinsey Global Institute, 2011). The contributors to the current issue of the *International Journal of Interactive Systems and Technologies* collectively demonstrate that social interaction technologies have the potential to strengthen communities, generate societal benefit, and create a more engaged and connected world. The issue, therefore, will be of interest to scholars, practitioners, and students of technology who would like to consider the implications of technology for the public sector, news industry, education and teaching, and society at large.

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ENDNOTES

[1]   Internet World Stats. (2012, June 30). *Internet usage statistics: The Internet big picture.* Retrieved from http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

[2]   Binelli, M. (2012). *Detroit city is the place to be: The afterlife of an American metropolis.* New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt Company.

[3]   Florida, R. (2013, April 10). Class-divided cities: Detroit edition. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from http://www.theatlanticcities.com/neighborhoods/2013/04/class-divided-cities-detroit-edition/4679/

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