Chapter IX

The Ethics of Social Information Retrieval

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we discuss some of the social and ethical issues associated with social information retrieval. Using the work of Habermas, we argue that social networking is likely to exacerbate already disturbing trends towards the fragmentation of society and a corresponding decline reduction in social diversity. Such a situation is not conducive to developing a healthy, democratic society. Following the tradition of critical theorists of technology, we conclude with a call for responsible and aware technological design with more attention paid to the values embedded in new technological systems.

INTRODUCTION

The development of social information retrieval systems has begun to generate interest among information scientists eager to apply such techniques to the development of ever more advanced searching tools. The goal is a laudable one. Current information retrieval systems are mediocre at best in terms of either user friendliness or, alternatively, in their ability to sort through the enormous number of documents generated on an ever-growing basis by our networked societies. Yet in the haste to apply social information retrieval techniques, are we running the risk of creating new problems? In this chapter we wish to sound a note of caution to those involved in this burgeoning field. To do so we introduce the work of the political theorist Jurgen Habermas, and in particular his concepts of the public sphere and communicative action. These concepts provide the necessary context for our discussion of the social and ethical implications of social information retrieval. We then draw on the well-established sociological concept of homophily to argue that
social networking is likely to exacerbate already disturbing trends towards the fragmentation of society that Habermas identifies. Specifically, we suggest that the effects of homophily engendered by these new technologies are likely to erode further the public sphere and the ability to engage in communicative action with deleterious effects on the skills needed to create communities at precisely a time in our history when they are most needed. We conclude with a call for responsible and aware technological design. In the tradition of critical theorists of technology such as Langdon Winner, we suggest that more attention needs to be paid to consciously embedding values in technological systems.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The notion of the public sphere, that is, a place where rational debate is both possible and widely engaged in, is most closely associated with the German political theorist Jurgen Habermas and his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. For Habermas, the idea of the public sphere was intimately associated with a new kind of space. Prior to the 18th century, space had tended to be separated into private and public areas. The private realm was associated with the family, but public space was tied to the state, and in particular, the monarch. The court was the center of this arena in the middle ages and the early modern period of European history. During the course of the 18th century, in England at least, a third space opened up, one that was public, but which was not centered on the royal court. This was the space of coffee shops, aristocratic salons, and printing presses. Here, rising members of the capitalist class could come together as independent individuals to debate issues relating to the conduct of state affairs that previously had been the preserve of secular or ecclesiastical authority. The development of this third space, neither court nor family, eventually led to the creation of a public sphere as it allowed two enabling characteristics to be met. First, coffee shops and salons rapidly became places where the outcome of debate were determined by rational argument, rather than tradition or authority. Second, status differences were increasingly bracketed or, in other words, “left at the door.” Instead of a person’s rank or level of social prestige determining who could say what, debate in the nascent public sphere required only the ability to engage in rational discourse. Out of such discourse, it was thought by participants, an enlightened public opinion could be wrought, one in opposition to the feudal state and one which had in mind the good of the entire society rather than any particular group.

Once in place, however, the bourgeois public sphere rapidly declined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Habermas identifies the cause of this decay in the re-feudalization of society, a return in many ways to the society of spectacle that characterized the public space of the middle ages with its elaborate ceremonies and protocols connecting kings and bishops with their people. A number of factors are held responsible for this decline. The first was the tendency of the public sphere to fuse with the state and private realm. The bracketing of inequalities was increasingly made impossible as more and more people acquired the education, time, and resources to participate in the public sphere. Instead of being “left at the door,” inequalities became the topic of debate and, later, amelioration. At the same time as the private realm, with its host of inequalities, was under increasing scrutiny, the state was intruding in the public sphere, picking up on the discussions increasingly taking place there around issues of inequality in order to develop the welfare state. The result was that the public sphere found itself increasingly sidelined through the creation of large organizations (trade unions, business associations, lobby groups) whose missions were to mediate between the state and individuals. These organizations pursued particular interests,
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