

**Social aspects of digital convergence: the role of mobile social software
in the evolving landscape of social space and community**

Giuseppe Lugano
Human Dimensions Research Group
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract

Digital convergence is often discussed as a synonym of technological convergence, a phenomenon related to the increasing integration of telecommunication services and media with the Internet. Instead, digital convergence is a complex and multifaceted process encompassing the technological, economic, cultural and social dimensions (Jenkins, 2001). In particular, research on the social aspects of digital convergence is still in its infancy; the goal of the paper is to illustrate how converged digital networks in general and mobile technologies in particular are contributing to the evolution and transformation of social space and community, two related concepts occupying a central place in the sociological discourse.

Taipale (2009) argued that the integration of mobile and Internet communications has transformed the way we perceive, conceive and experience social space: the new meaning of social space has been recently synthesized with the notion of hybrid social space (de Sousa e Silva, 2006; Kluitenberg, 2006; Erikson, 2007; Rheingold et al., 2007; Crabtree & Rodden, 2008; Bilandzic et al, 2009), in which the previously separated dimensions of social interaction overlap and create an always-on, ubiquitous and integrated digital layer.

Hybrid social space plays an important role in the characterization of contemporary communities as digital communities, socio-technical systems relying on the availability of ubiquitous and always-on social connectivity offered by converged digital networks. Being rooted in the use of computer networks as social networks (Wellman, 2001), the model of the integrated digital community shares many similarities but also extends the model of personal communities (Wellman, 1988) by introducing two novel aspects related to the characteristics of community ties. The first novelty concerns the nature of the tie: personal communities include only existing ties, which are often described as weak or strong ties. Instead, digital communities also acknowledge the significance of

latent ties, potential ties that are not activated as weak ties until some sort of interaction occurs (Haythornthwaite, 2002). The second novelty concerns the duration of the tie, which influences the life cycle of the whole community: while personal communities were traditionally based on long-lasting social relationships, digital communities also include ad-hoc opportunistic interactions creating temporary social ties.

As product of digital convergence and only current access point to one’s hybrid social space, mobile social software (MoSoSo) represents the enabler of digital communities. Previous research on MoSoSo presented several alternatives for the activation of latent ties by exploiting sensors and homophily principles to facilitate social serendipity (Eagle and Pentland, 2005). MoSoSo also enables instant mass mobilizations, such as smartmobs (Rheingold, 2002) and flashmobs (Mc Fedries, 2003; Marchbank, 2004; Kluitenberg, 2006), which represent a prototypical form of real-time digital community.

The limited understanding of the social aspects of digital convergence is likely not to progress much until the social foundations of digital convergence will not reach the maturity of its technological infrastructure. This paper offers a contribution in this direction by introducing a theoretical frame to discuss the role of emerging technologies, such as MoSoSo, in the evolving landscape of the hybrid social space and digital communities.

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