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The ONLIFE Initiative – A Concept Reengineering Exercise

by Judith Simon, ITAS

The deployment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their uptake by society affect radically the human condition, insofar as it modifies our relationships to ourselves, to others and to the world. With an unusual project design – the ONLIFE Initiative – the European Commission aimed at facilitating a broad reflection on future European policies. In this initiative, an interdisciplinary group of 13 scholars discussed the impact of information and communication technologies on our lives with a special emphasis on policy-relevant consequences of ICT-related developments. The results of their collective work are the ONLIFE Manifesto as well as individual contributions on the following four topics: Hyperconnectivity; Identity, Selfhood and Attention; Complexity, Responsibility and Governance; and the Public Sphere in a Computational Era. The results were publicly presented and discussed in Brussels on February 8, 2013. While this event in Brussels marked the end of the one-year project, the name "Inaugural Event" already indicates that it was intended as a starting point for a wider discussion.

1 Background

In February 2012, the European Commission (DG Connect) launched "The ONLIFE Initiative – a Concept Reengineering Exercise" within the context of the *Digital Agenda for Europe.* Initiated by Nicole Dewandre of the EC and chaired by Luciano Floridi (University of Oxford/Hertfortshire), an interdisciplinary group of 13 scholars was invited to discuss the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on our lives. Of particular concern were the policy-relevant consequences of ICT-related developments, e.g. changes with respect to notions of public space or new expectations towards public authorities resulting from the digital transition that characterizes our contemporary lifeworld. As the subtitle "Concept Reengineering Exercise" indi-

cates, however, the focus of this exercise was on re-assessing our conceptual toolbox with which we aim to understand and address these changes. That is, instead of making direct policy recommendations on issues such as privacy or data protection, the primary purpose of this exercise was to work on a conceptual level: to think, to re-think, to discuss, to modify concepts which may prevent or hinder a thorough understanding of these changes and to introduce new concepts which may be better suited to guide governance.

The collective thought exercise was initiated through a background note written by Nicole Dewandre and Luciano Floridi in which four transformations are proposed:

(a) "the blurring of the distinction between reality and virtuality", (b) "the blurring of the distinctions between human, machine and nature", (c) "the reversal from information scarcity to information abundance", and (d) "the shift from the primacy of entities to the primacy of interactions" (cf. Background Note).

While these four premises served as an excellent starter to initiate rather controversial debates, they did not foreclose our inquiries. Indeed, we ended up asking very different and rather basic questions such as the following:

- What does it mean to be human in the computational era?
- How can we experience freedom and plurality in a hyperconnected reality?
- Is the public/private distinction still relevant?
- How can we endorse and attribute responsibilities in a world where artifacts become agents?

2 Format and Process

Due to the rather unusual format of the ONLIFE Initiative, a few explanations regarding the process and the forms of collaboration may be of interest. Over the course of one year, the 13 ONLIFE members met five times, approximately every two months, for two half-days in Brussels. The first meeting in Brussels took place in February 2012, the last meeting in December 2012.

During the first meeting each participant was requested to respond to the background note and to present his or her views and suggestions on the process as well as the intended outcome of the ONLIFE Initiative. Thus, the whole project, its goal and outcomes just as much as its format and style were minimally predetermined. Rather, the project took shape and evolved within the process of collaborating itself, and even the title "ONLIFE Initiative" was a result of a collective decision-making process. The metaphor we used was "to build the raft while swimming". The decision to present our results in form of a manifesto was also made collectively at the third meeting in Brussels, and we spent a substantive amount of time during the last two meetings on writing, discussing and finalizing the manifesto.

The live meetings in Brussels were complemented with a continuous writing process. For each meeting, the ONLIFE members had to write a contribution of approximately 1000 words, which were exchanged prior to the next meeting to be discussed during the live meeting. These short texts reflect the wide range of topics that the members of the group considered important and were the basis for the final individual contributions we all had to deliver at the end of the one-year process.

The reason why I want to stress the specificities of this process is that at the end of the project, many participants stated that being a member of the ONLIFE Initiative has been one of the most inspiring experiences in their academic lives.[1] Indeed, it was considered a luxury to have time and space to discuss important topics with a group of committed colleagues. One conclusion that may be drawn from this experience is that instead of promoting all sorts of fancy and highly structured group exercises, there may be a huge and strikingly underrated benefit in giving unformatted space and time to scholars to collectively think about concepts without the permanent pressure to come up with quick solutions.

3 Stakeholder Involvement

In addition to these meetings of the core group, various *Onsite Meetings* were organized by some members to involve a broader range of stakeholders. Three onsite meetings were organized at the home institutions of ONLIFE members, i.e. at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Aarhus

University and the Nexa Center in Torino. Three further meetings were arranged to establish contacts with stakeholders beyond the core group: a meeting with delegates of the World Economic Forum, a meeting at the Internet & Society Co:llaboratory in Berlin as well as a meeting with members of SINTELNET[2], a FET Open Coordination Action with overlapping aims. Apart from these meetings, future stakeholder involvement is to be achieved through workshops and panels at conferences as well as through the new EC platform *Futurium*[3] (see below).

4 Results: The ONLIFE Manifesto and Individual Contributions

The results of the ONLIFE Initiative are the *ONLIFE Manifesto*, 13 *Individual Contributions* as well as *Commentaries* on the Manifesto. All these results can be found at the Initiative's website: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-initiative.

In the ONLIFE Manifesto, we start by challenging some core assumptions of modernity and show how certain views, e.g. regarding the relationship between the human, the natural and the artificial, despite having been debunked in the humanities and social sciences continue to inform and influence policy making. The Manifesto therefore must also be seen as an attempt to show how a critique of core assumptions of modernity must be considered in political and legal terms. Apart from this critique, the Manifesto also entails three proposals to better serve policies. In particular, we propose the following conceptual shifts with policy-relevant consequences for a *Good ONLIFE Governance*: to acknowledge in political terms the relational self, to support a digitally literate society and to care for our attentional capabilities.

The ONLIFE Manifesto is a joint outcome endorsed by all 13 ONLIFE members. However, to provide an opportunity to clarify one's perspective on the manifesto, to explain some nuances or even to offer some critique on specific claims made in the manifesto we allowed for *Commentaries* which can also be found on the project website.

Moreover, each participant wrote a contribution on a topic he or she considered particularly important. These contributions were grouped under four headings: Hyperconnectivity; Identity, Selfhood and Attention; Complexity, Responsibility and Governance; and the Public Sphere in a Computational Era. In the section on "Hyperconnectivity", Luciano Floridi argues that ICT is placing us in a hyperhistorical context and assesses the implications of the fact that nation states cease being the ultimate information agents. Jean-Gabriel Ganascia introduces the notion of "Grid Democracy" and describes Wikipedia as a realized utopia.

The section on "Identity, Selfhood and Attention" includes the contributions by Charles Ess, Claire Lobet-Maris, Stefana Broadbent and Yiannis Laouris. Laouris addresses two different topics in his contribution: the question of what it means to be alive in a computational era as well as issues around direct democracy. Ess also explores the future of democracy and equality and gives some philosophical background on media usage. In their joint contribution entitled "For a Grey Ecology", Lobet-Maris and Broadbent emphasize the need to protect our human and mental resources in much the same way as green ecology aims to protect natural resources.

In the section on "Complexity, Responsibility and Governance", Ugo Pagallo assesses the political and legal implications of the computational turn and develops a notion of "good onlife governance". Judith Simon focuses on the question of what it means to be a responsible knower in entangled socio-technical systems and offers a critique of Responsible Research and Innovation frameworks.

In the section on "The Public Sphere in a Computational Era", Nicole Dewandre argues in her contribution that while freedom is the purpose of politics, freedom is not about sovereignty but about beginnings. Both Peter-Paul Verbeek and Mireille Hildebrandt focus on smart environments. While Verbeek argues that developments in ambient intelligence require new understandings of our relationship with such technologies as well as new forms of governance and citizenship, Hildebrandt explores the possibilities of legal protection by design and applies this to the

problem of data protection regulation. Finally, Sarah Oates proposes a digital "Bill of Rights", and May Thorseth disentangles notions of reality, virtuality and fictitionality in their relation to public use of reason.

5 Public Event

On February 8, 2013, the results of the ONLIFE Initiative were presented and discussed at a public inaugural event in Brussels which was also streamed. The exceptionally well attended event took place at the European Commission and was hosted by Robert Madelin, the Director General of DG CONNECT. After the presentation of the Manifesto and a summary of the different contributions, numerous representatives from industry (Nokia, Microsoft, AT&T, and Google), consumer organizations and politics were invited to provide inaugural reactions to the Manifesto before the floor was opened for discussion with the audience.

In the afternoon, four different sessions addressed the implications of the ONLIFE Manifesto for (a) policy approaches to privacy and security, (b) policy approaches to innovation, intellectual property rights and new business models, (c) the responsible research and innovation framework, and (d) the research agenda for digital social science and humanities within the Horizon 2020 framework. In each of the sessions, invited speakers served as "firestarters" to initiate discussion, the discussion itself was open to all attendees. The event was closed in a plenary session including a talk by Julie Cohen and was chaired by Constantijn van Oranje-Nassau, Deputy Head of the Cabinet of Neelie Kroes.

6 The Future of the ONLIFE Initiative

While the event in Brussels marked the end of the one-year project, the name "Inaugural Event" already indicates that it was intended as a starting point for a wider discussion. Indeed, to quote the ONLIFE Manifest itself, it "aims to launch an open debate on the impacts of the computational era on public spaces, politics and societal expectations toward policy-making in the Digital Agenda for Europe's remit. More broadly, this Manifesto aims to start a reflection on the way in which a hyperconnected world calls for rethinking the referential frameworks on which policies are built". Besides the organization of meetings and workshops at various conferences, the major platform for engagement and participation related to the ONLIFE Initiative will be the newly established FUTURIUM[4], an online platform of the Digital Futures project of the European Commission which aims at facilitating a broad reflection on future European policies.

Further information about the ONLIFE Initiative, the ONLIFE Manifesto as well as all other documents can be found at: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-initiative.

On FUTURIUM the ONLIFE Initiative can be found at: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/futurium/en/content/onlife-manifesto-being-human-hyperconnected-era.

Notes

1) See also the comments on the website: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-original-outcome.
2) http://www.sintelnet.eu
3) https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/futurium/en/content/onlife-manifesto-being-human-hyperconnected-era
4) http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/futurium/

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