Why C&T conferences can make sense?

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Position paper

We could consider C&T conferences like other human centered technological conferences, and, in this case, we could argue that their focus, today, is not interesting enough to put together an adequate number of researchers.

But, if we go back to the debate, within which C&T conferences were ideated and launched, we should remember that their novelty was that people coming form a large set of different disciplines (larger than any other multi-disciplinary conference of this type) proposed them to open a multi-disciplinary forum where the impact of ICT in social life could be analyzed and discussed. This characterization has been visible in the first C&T conference and then slowly declined to, almost, disappear in the last ones.

In order to go back to initial inspiration of the C&T conferences and reinforce it, I think that we should deepen what was moving us when this story began.

I think that the originality of the C&T conferences was in their ambition to offer a forum where people could link each-other the analysis of existing communities (both augmented through ICT or not), the (economical) evaluation of the value they generate, and, finally, the design of novel systems supporting (diverse types of) communities. The idea was that there is a strict binding connecting how communities (and their members) behave, the technology supporting them and the value they produce. This means, for example, that papers presenting a case study dedicated to a community, should pay attention to the value generated by it and to its ICT support; that papers presenting a new system, should explain how it is changing the behavior of the community using it and the value it generates; that the characterization of the value generated by a community should be based on the analysis of its behavior and of the technology supporting it.

More generally, C&T conferences were, may be implicitly, aiming to offer a forum for renovating our understanding of social relations taking into account how ICT was changing them.

This holistic viewpoint has been rapidly lost in the papers discussed at our conferences. Papers presenting case studies (in majority) and system prototypes (in minority) occupied all the space of the conference and the papers discussing the value dimension (and, together with them, scholars from economical disciplines) left.

It is probably the standard format of our conferences that was not adequate for the ambitious aim of our conferences. In this position paper, therefore, I will list the questions that should be at the center of our conferences and suggest new formats for them.

General questions

If we make a sharp schematization, today, we can say that the research dedicated to understanding how social life is impacted by ICT, the modifications the notion of social value in contemporary 'post-modern' societies, and the features that should characterize systems supporting social interaction, cooperation and/or knowledge management, have little or no inter-connections. Generally, for a researcher focusing on the design of innovative systems, social and/or economical sciences are considered as well established disciplines presenting a specific and stable view of reality. In multi-disciplinary research we should, instead, intertwine the debates animating all the involved disciplines, so that multi-disciplinarity becomes a away to go beyond the limits of any of the contributing disciplines.

This means, in our case, that the research interesting the C&T community should take into consideration general questions interconnecting the controversies animating its contributing disciplines.

Let us make some examples.

1. *Social aggregates*

   Why making reference to communities and not to other concepts like social networks, etc.?

   How communities are affected by the fact that individuals, today, participate in several different communities?

   Do virtual communities exist? Or is it better to speak about augmented communities?

   With respect to augmented communities, in which sense are communities with a central physical space and virtual augmentations (the community of Venice inhabitants comprehensive of those who are (temporally) located abroad) and communities constituted by a virtual archipelago of several physical locations (our community) different?

   Etc.

2. *Social capital*

   What is social capital, and how is it created?
   How can we measure social capital?
   How are Florida's ideas useful at this scope?
   Etc.

3. *People versus communities*

   People today participate in several diverse communities: which problems and which values derive from this fact?

   How can we characterize and measure the degree of openness of a community?

   Can we create a community?
   Etc.

The above questions are indicative of what the papers submitted to a C&T conference should discuss through their analysis or design contributions. The idea is that they should not limit themselves to present their field research or their designed systems, but explicitly say how the latter contribute to our understanding of the impact of ICT on social life.

Conference Formats

A small number of peer-reviewed papers facing one or more of the above question, with time for discussing them

Some invited new papers and/or already published papers, selected in the literature, that are distributed to the community. Submitted papers should indicate which paper(s) they want to discuss. The conference will be organized in sessions constituted by a talk of the author of one of the discussed papers (in two parts: at the beginning and at the end of the session) followed by the presentation of the papers discussing it.

A flexible format combining sessions with submitted papers, sessions with invited papers, session with panels, etc. (in this case it is very important that conference committees are able to select papers facing the above general questions, otherwise nothing changes with respect to what happens today).

An equilibrated combination of the three above proposals.