

Political and Social Issues in Web Design & Development

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1 INTRODUCTION

As in the real world, there exist many social and political issues regarding the online world. Both are closely related and have a great impact on our commercial, political and social lives. As a professional web designer or developer, it is crucial to be aware of the current issues, in order to act responsibly in social matters and to be in accordance with the law. Some issues are similar to the ones known from real life, and others are completely new. The issues discussed in this paper address the social issues in a first step, and the political issues in a second step.

2 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES

The internet provides many social advantages to the public. It is a valuable tool enabling people to learn, do business and communicate with each other. It has many advantages, for instance, the preservation of information. The internet makes it possible to keep language alive and preserve our cultural heritage. (HRELP, 2007; Westminster, 2007)

However, most of the advantages the internet offers, also implicate social problems. One of the negative effects is that today's society has become very dependent on the internet. Some users spend most of their time online, therefore, less time in the real world with live person-to-person communication. Many internet users miss out on a social life by not participating in out-door activities or even just meeting and talking to other persons (Galston, 2000). Schwartz

(1995) even claims that a virtual community cannot be a replacement for a face-to-face community. Nevertheless, it must be added that the internet also provides new forms of communication, such as e-mail, message boards, social networks, chat and voice chat, which bring people together, regardless of their geographical location.

Another negative effect is the danger for unaware users because information and data are freely accessible. Sensitive content, such as pornography, gambling, and in general: violence of text, pictures and videos make the internet an inappropriate place for children. Pornography is even protected under U.S. Constitution, and has become a normal part of the internet. Parental control software tries to restrict or forbid access to harmful sites using filtering methods (Surfwatch.com NetNanny.com). Unfortunately they are not perfect, since it is not possible to effectively filter everything as demonstrated by various studies (Resnick, Hansen and Richardson, 2004). Some laws, which vary from one region of the world to another, prohibit certain information from being hosted. However, since the internet is global, the information can be hosted somewhere else and still be accessed. As for the danger for children, some legal efforts have been made: The CDA¹ and the COPA² for instance, restrict pornography on the internet to make it more safe for children. These rules are, however, not always applied to many sexually explicit websites. Some other acts such as COPPA³ forbid the collection of personal

¹The Decency Act of 1996

²The Children's Online Protection Act of 1998

³The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 2000

information from children under the age of 13. Nowadays, this is implemented in most open source message boards such as phpBB.

An early start in using computer and the internet use teaches children how to gain access to educational information they will need for their future studies. Furthermore, in term of home school, education through the internet allows the student to work at his or her own pace. On the other hand, children still have to face the danger of harmful information and possible social alienation in everyday life. This lack of social contact can prevent them from building social skills required by most employers.

Another drawback is that not everyone has access to the internet. To begin with, the initial high costs for hardware and continuous costs for use of an internet connection make it unaffordable for many. Secondly, most websites are not accessible for disabled people. Finally, most e-commerce sites require a credit card for payment. Consequently, the internet places a gap between social classes, especially concerning education, as explained by Huda (2002). Nevertheless, some efforts are made to ease access by providing special deals for people who meet certain criteria, for example students (StudentComputers, 2007). The WAI⁴ also define standards on making websites available to disabled people.

The internet also allows the creation of social networks. Online communities offer the opportunity to belong to a group with a common interest, independent of geographical boundaries. Many different types of online communities exist, as covered by Lanquetin (2006). Many online communities are involved in activities, such as raising the awareness of social problems and offering possible solutions. Some organisations are involved in issues related to women in society (Glasscock and Salinas, 2007; MSFoundation, 2007), the responsible use of the internet for young people (Hughes, 2007; GetSafeOnline, 2007; Childnet, 2007) or various non profit organisations involved in peace (Unipaz, 2007) and help actions (CharityUSA, 2007). Many more organisations can be easily found online, as shown in the Google Directory (Google, 2007). However, online communities can also give the impression of separation

of people by classifying them into community groups, as it is the case for ethnic communities.

Beside the aforementioned social issues, many political issues also exist. Researches by White (1997) have shown that the interest in politics has not changed over the years. The average opinion about the role of IT in democracy, is that IT has generally a small to good impact on democracy due to its ‘decentralised architecture’ and the ‘diversity of options’ (Becker, 2001; Berman and Weitzner, 1997). Additionally, Margolis and Resnick (2000, chapter 9, section 2) are convinced that the internet also have a positive effect on democracy, because of its economic development. Nevertheless most authors argue that the internet is more a logical evolution than a revolution (Bimber, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Bimber (1999) and Cavanaugh (2000) believe that the discourses over the internet are less serious and that the content of some users are questionable. Furthermore Margolis and Resnick (2000, chapter 9, section 1) also explain that the internet will not solve the problem of Digital Divide. As consequence, there will be no ‘shift in power from the haves to the have-nots’.

The internet can also implicate political disadvantages, due to the nature of the technology: There are no physical boundaries for information, it can flow freely around the world, and data can be replicated without cost. It is, therefore, difficult to apply traditional laws to the online world. Furthermore, the government must be able to find the right balance between freedom and control.

Privacy is one of the biggest issues the internet must face. Although there exist laws and constitutions supporting the right of privacy, users are, in most cases, required to give away most of their personal details in order to use a service provided on the internet (e-mail for example). Most of the time, the users will not even notice that their actions on the internet are tracked and monitored. Google is one of the best example in this case: They have placed advertising banners on many famous websites. Information stored in a cookie tells Google exactly which websites the user has visited, provided Google had their banners on these websites.

With regards to encryption, some countries forbid strong encryption. In France for instance the free use of encryption is not allowed and the government has

⁴Web Accessibility Initiative

the authority to decrypt personal data, if necessary (Flacke, 1998). Suspicious persons even have to hand over encryption keys to law enforcement. It is questionable if this practices violate the individual's right to privacy.

At the moment, another important political issue involves software patents, especially in Europe. By patenting a discovery, the creator has the sole rights for 20 years on the discovery he made. In most cases, large corporations have the majority of patents; IBM for instance is the leader with approximately 3000 U.S. patents in 2005 (IBM, 2007). However, patents, and especially *software* patents, are dangerous for medium-sized businesses. If big corporations see a competition danger in the latter, they can charge them for using patents owned by the larger corporation. Till July 2005, the European Union was seriously debating whether or not to pass a law legalizing software patents. Unfortunately for the medium-sized companies, it is nearly impossible to avoid the use of these patents; most of them are used in any simple program. This law could have meant the end of many open source softwares, such as the Linux operating system (NoSoftwarePatents, 2007). Fortunately the law did not pass, proving that involved citizens and factual information can have a great impact on political decisions. The FFII⁵ provides more information about the risks of software patents and gives a large list of campaigns against them (FFII, 2007).

Another issue lies in the responsibility of the user versus the provider. Who should be accountable for content found on the internet? The internet service provider or the user? The bulletin board owner or the board user? The creator and distributor of peer-to-peer software or the peer-to-peer user? In most situations, the problem is dealt with at its source. Some good examples are the interdiction of the file sharing software Napster in July 2000 or the closure of file sharing advertising websites, such as suprnova.org in late 2004 or isohunt.com in January 2007 (BBC, 2000, 2006). The difference between Napster and new P2P programs is that Napster had a centralised server, once this is shut down, the entire Napster network is down as well. In modern P2P programs, the applications work decentralised, meaning that the clients operate also as

servers. It is, therefore, impossible to stop the spread of files. In many cases, the concerned bodies tries to shut down the websites which allows the users to connect to each others. One example is suprnova.org, one of the biggest torrent files⁶ distribution platforms, which was shut down in late November 2004. It is however questionable if this is a good solution to the problem, since the users will always find a way to get to their files.

Furthermore, one must differentiate between the publisher and the distributor. While the distributor cannot be hold responsible for the content, the publisher in return can. In the case Cubby against Compuserve, a bulletin board user named Cubby sued Compuserve for defamatory material on their board (Trubow, 1993; Townsend, Aalberts and Gibson, 2000). In this example, it is interesting to see, that Compuserve was not held responsible, since they are the *distributor* and not the *publisher* of the content.

As mentioned in the example above, defamatory material is another issue. Townsend, Aalberts and Gibson (2000) explains how defamation can easily destroy a person's reputation, especially through the internet. This medium is ideal to spread rumours, since it is very fast and cannot be stopped. Once the information is posted on a website, it is nearly impossible to undo the damage. Even after it is removed, Google still caches the website with the information on it (Kahney, 2001). The same problem is also true for private material, such as Paris Hilton's private videos, spread over all peer-to-peer networks. In the majority of cases it is impossible to find the responsible and take legal actions.

Domain name registration, especially in the beginning of the internet boom, is also a major issue. Many domain names are bought by so-called *parasites*, which try to buy popular domain names to resell them later for higher prices or display advertising. The same problem applies to *cybersquatter*, which acquire domain names of brick-and-mortar businesses (Fromkin, 2001). Some laws prevent these acts, such as the ACPA⁷, which protects persons or bodies having a

⁵The Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure

⁶Torrent files are meta files telling the BitTorrent clients where to find the tracker, which is needed to download files

⁷The Anticybersquatting Consumer Protection Act of 1999

right to a domain name. Nevertheless it seems that large corporations still get their domain name due to their power. This was the case for the domain milka.fr, which was previously owned by Mrs. Milka from France, but was then taken away from her by Kraft Foods. (Fredrich, 2005)

Another big political issue is the probable introduction of TCP⁸ by the TCPA⁹. A chip called TPM¹⁰ is meant to be installed on any hardware component to allow the TCPA to prevent any unwanted software or hardware. The results of the TCP would be the end of any free or open source software as well as high costs for the acquisition of TCPA certification, which are not affordable for all small or medium-sized businesses. Approximately 200 companies, in most cases big corporations such as Microsoft, IBM or Intel, are already part of the TCPA (Anderson, 2003). This is another example where the balance between freedom and control would not be upheld.

Many more internet related issues exists. For example the problem with unsolicited e-mail (spam), which costs internet service providers and users time and money; hacking or denial of service attacks; copyright infringement through cracking; phishing, a semantic attack on the user to get her passwords, pins or tans; the spread of computer viruses; or organised crime and terrorists networks.

Relation to the Author's Project

In the BSc Honours Project realised by the author, new web technologies will be evaluated. By acknowledging the discussed issues, the author can develop an application conform to established standards, such as those defined by the W3C¹¹, in order to implement an accessible website. It ought to be verified if the used software components of the project do not violate copyrights, which could be prevented by using open source software. In the design and creation phase of a web application the author should also verify if the laws, regarding the holding for private information, are respected. Furthermore, the application must be secured, in order to gain the users' trust. Finally, the

author should always be aware of future social and political issues, especially regarding the law.

3 CONCLUSION

Various social and political issues exists in the online world. Many issues are enriching, including amongst others the preservation of information, new forms of communication, online communities, social networks and new educational possibilities. However, the internet also implicates many new negative aspects, such as dependency to the internet, alienation in social life, deprivation of privacy, control over information, censorship, encryption, cyber crimes, violence and copyright and the digital divide issues.

Regarding many political issues, the government sometimes take wrong decisions, because politicians are simply not always well informed or qualified in the information technology field to understand the consequences of their decisions. Therefore, decisions regarding the introduction of software patents or TCP represents a great danger for innovation and freedom.

For web designers and developers it is important to know the legal and political issues, as they are closely related to the development of their business. Software developers can also actively participate in the decision-making process of political issues, by being informed and involved in the latter and giving professional advice and opinions.

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⁸The Trusted Computing Platform

⁹The Trusted Computing Platform Alliance

¹⁰A Trusted Platform Module

¹¹The World Wide Web Consortium

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