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Social Computing goes mainstream: 41% of EU Internet users connected to Web 2.0

The rapid growth of Social Computing (also known as Web2.0) allows users to play an influential role in the way commercial and public products and services are shaped. In 2008, 41% of EU Internet users were engaged in Social Computing activities through Social Networking Sites (SNS), blogs, photo and video sharing, online multi-player games and collaborative platforms for content creation and sharing. This percentage rises to 64% if users aged under 24 only are considered. Worldwide, 165 million visitors connected themselves to SNS per month, more than 100 000 blogs were created daily and more than one billion photos and 40 million videos were uploaded and tagged.

These are some of the results published today in the "The impact of Social Computing on the EU Information Society and Economy" report, produced by the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS) of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC).

Beyond entertainment: the value of social innovation

The report shows that Social Computing goes beyond individual networking and entertainment, as it empowers tens of millions of Europeans to support their work, health, learning and citizenship in innovative ways. The research found that Social Computing is reshaping work practices, as employees join communities of interest outside their organisations to improve their knowledge and skills. Social innovation enabled by Social Computing contributes to improved lifelong learning processes, business competitiveness, social inclusion and integration of immigrants, among others.

The study also highlights the fact that Social Computing has also been adopted by industries and governments to engage customers and citizens in designing and providing more user-centric and effective services. In particular, governments, politicians and citizens can now access tools for achieving public goals such as better-informed public decision making and new forms of civic and political participation.

Emerging risks and challenges

According to the JRC research, Social Computing poses the risk of a new 'digital divide', as new applications and technologies arise. A lack of critical analysis skills and awareness of the nature and quality of content may lead users not to question information accuracy and reliability: for example, patients could use peer support for self-diagnosis or citizens could be misled by political or commercial opinions. Networking, collaboration, sharing and information search skills are also needed to benefit from the opportunities offered by Social Computing.

Major threats related to security, safety and privacy are emerging, either new or more threatening than before: security, impersonation and identity theft risks are increased, 'cyber-bullying' and 'online grooming', for example, create new threats for children and youngsters. Above all, unclear data ownership and lack of user control of own data are generating unprecedented privacy invasion risks.

Policy recommendations and future prospects

The report argues that European policy-makers are well placed to set favourable conditions for the spreading of Social Computing practices.

For instance, to address emerging threats related to Social Computing and empower users, policy makers should support the development of new digital skills and lifelong learning programmes. Awareness raising about the nature and quality of user-generated content and the security, safety and privacy risks involved in its use is also needed.

In addition, it provides policy advice on how to realise the potential for increases in public service quality and democratic governance and business productivity that Social Computing implies. Measures such as raising awareness on the potential of Social Computing among public service actors and enterprises, opening up public governance to embrace bottom-up user-led initiatives and, promoting the implementation of Social Computing applications in public services, are suggested.

Social Computing initiatives are spontaneous, self-governing and have an enormous potential for horizontal collaboration open to all users, which challenge existing institutional governance systems used to working with vertical hierarchies. The co-existence of these opposite approaches will need to be carefully managed, the report says.

The JRC study foresees that Social Computing will further evolve and grow into a fundamental part of the digital networked society. It will interact with trends in the mobile domain, as it enables the provision and fruition of socially intelligent, ubiquitous services. In the coming decade, it could lead to positive developments in business, education, health, social inclusion and cohesion and encourage more participatory governance mechanisms.

Download

To download the "The impact of Social Computing on the EU Information Society and Economy" report, please visit:

<http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu/publications/pub.cfm?id=2819>

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