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Enhancing Interaction Spaces by Social Media for the Elderly: A Workshop Report

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Abstract. The extension of CSCW research towards new domains, such as the home, has brought up many ideas to support ageing in place. However, the social wellbeing as a pivotal pillar of healthiness besides physical and psychical health has not gained much attention yet. With a workshop at the European Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work in 2009, we opened a forum for research in the area of social wellbeing of the elderly by means of focusing on social media. By bringing together CSCW and social media researchers we wish to open up discussions on the development of new interaction and coordination spaces for wellbeing and social support which enhance the spaces of physical home environments.

1 Introduction

The western society is facing needs for innovative health-oriented services in elder communities. In fact, there is actually a real demographic change: the elderly population is growing (according to the World Health Organization, the proportion of people age 60 and over worldwide is growing faster than any other age group) and there are more and more multi-morbidity and chronic diseases.

Though health must not be reduced only to bodily and mental wellbeing – social wellbeing is another important aspect of healthiness. Elder people desire for independence, self-determination, and quality of life in their own house as long as possible. Many innovative research projects lack on these integrative views and focus on physical well-being, with smart homes, ambient assisted living technologies, failure management, cognitive and physical stimulation.

Ageing in place is increasingly emphasised as a preferable alternative to institutional care. Although it offers the potential of both practical and psychosocial benefits, the reality of remaining in the community in later life can prove problematic. This clearly points to an opportunity for technological solutions to support independent living for seniors. A primary concern for this population is the loss of companionship, which can contribute to isolation, depression, and decreased socialization. The best weapon against senior isolation is family contact, but this is made difficult by living arrangements. Thus, new opportunities exist for domestic technologies to support socially oriented activities for older people.

The shift of ICT from the office to home environments has brought out a range of CSCW research in the application domain of the home with different foci, such as home care (e.g. Palen and Aaløkke 2006, Mamykina et al. 2004) and family life activities and coordination in the home (Crabtree and Rodden 2004). However, the perspective on the social every-day life of the elderly and related ICT support is – in contrast to its relevance – a relatively new one.

The extension of the origin CSCW research domain of office work towards other domains, such as the home, benefits from a stock of concepts and foci in CSCW research, such as the design for context and social awareness (e.g. Crabtree 2003). However, the occupation with the new research domains beyond the workplace reveals the need for acknowledging the unique demands of domestic technology appropriation and use. Rather than designing for efficiency and utilitarian pursuits, home technologies aiming at fostering sociability, inclusion and social awareness need to take into account different underlying design aspects, like designing for recreational or ludic experiences (Gaver 2006).

This stresses the importance of ethnographical work and participatory design methods for informing domestic ICT design, which will be able to address the specificities and needs of every-day life and especially social wellbeing of the elderly, based on interaction, coordination and collaboration between actors of the elderlies' networks, such as neighbours, friends, peers, remote family members, care providers, etc.

We are particularly interested in social media, which includes Social TV (general term for technology that supports communication and interaction in the context of watching television (Rice and Alm 2007)), and other community media, such as online communities with special focus on social support for the elderly. Social support is an exchange of verbal and non verbal messages, which transmit

emotion or information in order to reduce the uncertainty or the stress of a person (Barnes & Duck, 2007). Directly or indirectly, lending social support to a person implies the recognition of its value. Even if the support is informational, affection is the main dimension of social support, which is a comforting communication (Caplan & Turner, 2007). Social media can contribute formulating virtual generational communities, which permit to discuss, to exchange experiences with peers instead of family members, social workers, nurses or practitioners. These generational communities are then the way to provide social support within peers.

CSCW research on home applications has warned against alienating principles and assumptions from the ICT design for work environments in the home. The same carefulness is demanded for alienating entertainment and social media formats for younger generations to seniors. Against the background of attempting to enhance the social interaction space for the elderly by means of social media, by converging physical and virtual spaces, ethnographically-informed research is needed for new technologies and applications to literally find a place in the elder peoples' lives.

Therefore, the elaboration of the metaphor of space appears helpful to understand the organization and social needs in every-day life of elder people to finally come to successful social media offers. The spatial turn "lens" has been taken up in the last decade to foster understanding of ICT use in relation to the perception of physical and virtual spaces and in the interplay of spatial contexts, meanings and experiences (De Certeau 1984, Dourish 2006). For designing social technologies which aims at opening up new interaction and communication spaces – be it in the nearer neighbourhood, be it in communication and interaction support with remote friends and family members or be it in online discussion groups with peers – all of them having their origin in the home environment of the elderly which has to be carefully taken into account in social support technology design. Spatial research concepts, such as proxemics in the sense of Barthes (1972) or territorial markers (Hall 1990) point to the socio-cultural foundations of individual perceptions and appropriation of space in a relational and processural stance which have to be taken into account when designing spaces enhanced by social media.

2 Workshop Course and Results

The workshop attracted researchers from areas like Human-Computer Interaction, Media Studies or Art & Design. The diversity has been present in the submissions, and it is present in the extended position papers that we present in this special issue.

This special issue collects four position papers of the workshop as extended versions of the original submissions. This allowed the authors to integrate the results from the workshop discussions into their argument.

These contributions approach the topic “social media for the elderly, for social well-being and social inclusion” from different points of view regarding empirical work and research approaches; however all aim at the goal of supporting community building.

Two papers position their research on community building by social media in elderly neighbourhoods, senior housing, existing and newly built, surrounded by self-organized or institutionalized organization:

The first contribution, by Rikke Aarhus, Stinne Aaløkke Ballegaard, Erik Grönvall, and Simon Bo Larsen, from Denmark, describes ‘real’ senior communities. Based on their observations and informal interviews in six different senior dwellings, they present the key findings related to social interaction and the formation of communities and explicate how these findings apply to designers of social media technologies.

The second contribution, by Andrea Botero and Kari-Hans Kommonen from Finland, describes the collective project launched by the “Active Seniors Association”. They aim at organizing their future everyday life based on neighbourly help, which includes both the construction of an apartment building for the community as well as the continuous development and configuration of an active community life with shared practices amongst its inhabitants.

This workshop also connects Social Media to Ambient Assisted Living research. The idea is to go beyond smart home technologies which enrich the home with a multitude of sensors, actuators, and multimedia equipment, without taking into account sufficiently the loneliness of the ageing people.

In the third contribution, by Karin A. Hummel, Helmut Hlavacs, Anneliese Lilgenau, Hanna Mayer, and Verena Moser-Siegmeth, from Austria, a system is presented, which, in contrast to many existing smart home solutions, includes the relatives in the loop and – thus – avoids increased isolation usually fostered by a fully automated home.

Design questions and the well-being of the elderly people are also discussed in the fourth contribution, by Cornelius Neufeldt, from Germany. This paper centres on game play with elderly people and questions of appropriate interaction/input devices. In an empirical study *Nintendo Wii* is used and criticized for the certain target group.

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