On not being a stranger. Making sense of the sociable media landscape.

Henriette Cramer
Mobile Life Centre & SICS
Kista, Sweden
henriette@mobilelifecentre.org

Nicolas Belloni
Mobile Life Centre &
Stockholm University
Kista, Sweden
nicolas@mobilelifecentre.org

Mattias Rost
Mobile Life Centre & SICS
Kista, Sweden
rost@sics.se

Abstract

This paper discusses our view on sociable media and applications in which social connectedness is not limited to (re)connecting with (distant) lovers, friends and family and maintaining long-term relationships, but also encompasses casual connections to nearby `strangers'. Based on experiences at the Mobile Life Center, we discuss various aspects that need to be taken into account in design and evaluation of social connectedness applications. We argue against an overly quantitative approach to evaluation of social and affective aspects of media, services or `things' that facilitate social connectedness. We aim for a meaningful comparison between applications and their social-affective effects, without foregoing neither negative consequences of increased social awareness, nor the unique, wondrous experiences that might have never occurred without them.

Keywords
Social connectedness, sociable media

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.2. Information interfaces and presentation: User Interfaces - Evaluation/Methodology.

Introduction
Connecting to other people is a fundamental human need and is reflected in the expanding field of sociable (or social) media that aim for maintaining awareness about, and connecting with other people. Applications explicitly designed

for social connectedness span a broad range of contexts, content and types of experiences. Broader still, a 'sense of belonging' can also be fostered by applications that might have not been explicitly designed with this goal in mind. This paper outlines our perspective on services and `things' that foster social connectedness, the challenges we encounter when designing for social connectedness, our views on what is important in its `measurement' and topics we feel need to be discussed in the community. This view is fueled by a number of trends: the appreciation of the importance of experiential qualities of interactions and their situatedness [5], the rise of pervasive and mobile services, including the 'internet of things' and the renewed appreciation for 'place' [7](cf. the upsurge in social, location-based services). The terms used in the field are by no means standardised, and they cover a vast landscape of services and artefacts facilitating social connectedness. In the call of this workshop the authors appear to focus mainly on connections between distant 'loved ones' and on sociable media as private communication channels. However, when considering social connectedness as "the momentary experience of belongingness and relatedness with others" as in the call, such connectedness is not just about remote connections and maintaining a bond via dedicated interactive objects or social networks, but it is also about temporarily connecting to the people who frequent the same space - whether (familiar [12]) strangers or friends - and sharing content and interests (Yelp, Flickr, Delicious). How then, should we deal with this vast social connectedness landscape if we aim to compare their social and affective impact?

We should create some order!
This variety of services and applications does not mean comparing their effects on feeling connected is impossible. However, we need to consider their differences for more meaningful evaluations. Applications range from 'objects' representing distant friends or family [3] to mobile services showing other people (known and unknown) around you (e.g. Aka-aki). Some of these applications explicitly aim for social contact, while other services might focus on sharing a specific type of content (pictures, video, discussions, or locations) with as a side-effect the belonging to a community (Flickr, Yelp). Some will sustain existing connections (e.g. friends on Facebook, interactive objects connecting a child in a hospital with their parents), while others will connect (familiar) strangers [12] and cater new connections (activity awareness visualisations in large offices, Aka-aki). Some services provide more indirect social awareness by for example showing where your 'friends' are and who else frequent the same places as you do (e.g. Foursquare). Other media will enable broadcasting (e.g. social awareness streams [11] such as Twitter, Facebook's Livefeed) as opposed to 'one-on-one contact'. The granularity of content or activity offered will differ; 'nudges', or 'pokes' are on/off-type occurrences open for interpretation and are different from extensive 'what am I doing' updates or content such as photos. Yet another class of applications enable shared 'touch' or other remote physical experiences [10].

The most important features identified by Donath that sociable media can differ on are rhythm, format, bandwidth, permanence and identification [4]. However, the current examples above show additional influential factors. It is questionable whether comparisons over all of these dimensions would be helpful. These obviously are non-exclusive continuous spectrums and the examples of types of media above are in no way extensive. For each design and evaluation we should decide to which part of this landscape we want to cater. At the workshop we would like to discuss a more definitive taxonomy of dimensions and applications.

Designing & evaluating sociable media

Based on our experiences we consider a number of aspects as crucial in both design and evaluation of sociable systems.

Being more connected is not always pleasant

Sharing information and being connected 'all the time' can both lead to positive feelings of belonging and as well as serious negative consequences. Both obvious and non-obvious privacy concerns are raised (e.g. [1]). Who can see my data, what can be derived from my data? What autonomous decisions are made by systems on my behalf, which data is analysed and broadcasted to the world? Negative aspects might be different for various types of applications. For applications enabling connectedness between family, friends or lovers, it might be hard to 'switch off'. Actively cutting a connection might be regarded as a statement ("what is my partner hiding?"). Being aware of others' activities can also result in insecurity on how to act on the information available. What should one do if a colleague on Facebook changes their relationship status indicating a possible dramatic breakup? When are you close enough to react, when would reacting be an inappropriate intrusion? Without this update you wouldn't have known about the break-up and, if you would be deemed 'worthy' of knowing, you would have been told personally and would be able to react. But not reacting now you do know, is that ok? Working with Subway Friend Finder [2] we found that participants found awareness of a colleague being on the same train could be rather stressful: "i do not know him that well, I do not want to talk about work!". Should they react to this information, would it be ok to ignore their presence?

Increasing social connectedness might also imply connections to people you do not want to be associated with. As an example, when trying out a specific location-based service by one of the authors of this paper, the appropriation by certain users of this service was a little too close for comfort. One of its users was broadcasting his interest in finding out whether women were wearing stockings. While in principle there's nothing wrong with such an interest, being confronted with someone else's specific fetish during a daily commute is not particularly pleasant. Instead of a feeling of belonging with the other commuters, the public space all of a sudden changed into a place potentially filled with people intent on crossing personal boundaries.

(Dis)connects are both individual and shared

Specific user needs and consequences have to be considered when designing for social connectedness. For instance, Le Dantec [9] describes the both very familiar and specific needs of homeless users such as maintaining both social connection with the larger world, as well as local connections for safety and support. Very specific applications will be perfect for some users, while absolutely senseless for others. This especially applies to extremely individual designs such as Social Sewing [14], designed around an elderly woman not being able to attend her sewing circle anymore and in the project being supplied with replicate sewing machines representing her remote sewing mates. In addition, the most important aspects of an activity often lie in the context around the actual, individual interaction with the system [5]. Sociable media are not designed for just the individual, and arguably then they should not be evaluated from the perspective of a single user and how connected he or she feels only. Effects on relationships and the broader societal implications are crucial to take into account. When we evaluate the impact of connectedness applications on their users, we will also have to consider the socio-affective implications for people that do not, or cannot use such systems (i.e. who is left out?) [9].

Quantitative comparison isn't always the answer
To compare the effects on social connectedness between different applications, as the workshop call points out, standardised evaluations would be helpful. These could for example focus on individual feelings of social connectedness (e.g. [6]) or the perceived benefits and costs of using a medium (e.g. [13]). However, we also want to push back on the seeming emphasis on quantitative evaluation, especially when focusing on social and affective aspects of experiences. The specific, unique settings and the wide range of applications as outlined above make standardisation difficult. A 'high score' on connectedness does not provide much insight in the new dilemmas raised by being more socially aware or relational changes that might occur. Capturing deeply personal, emotional experiences on a scale is also extremely challenging [8]. We believe a full evaluation should capture affective and social effects of being connected on an individual, relational and societal level, potential downsides as well as the unique magic and wondrous experiences that have been enabled (and allow us: the one defining casual encounter turning into a lifelong romance).

Challenges
We would like to engage a discussion on a number of issues:
- How can we order the dynamic landscape of sociable media and artefacts aimed at social connectedness?
- Can we compare applications aimed at social connectedness between lovers, friends and family with applications aiming at awareness or casual contact between (familiar) strangers?
- How to design for social connectedness in a situated manner? Which designs and evaluation methods have (not) worked for the workshop participants and why?
- How can quantitative and/or qualitative evaluations capture and compare unique, shared experiences that such technologies might enable? Will focus on scales and numbers make us miss out on the most meaningful magic (and disaster)?

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