

## Why social networking will change society

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A report published on 19 November by the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS) of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) says that the growth of Web 2.0 is allowing Internet users to play an important role in the way that commercial and public products and services are shaped and used. Web 2.0 a term for the 'second wave' of the world wide web, is

characterised by applications with user-generated content (such as blogs and social networking sites), and by cloud computing (where data and applications are stored on Web servers and are accessible from any Web browser rather than being locally installed in an office, for instance).

The report, 'The Impact of Social Computing on the EU Information Society and Economy', says that in 2008, 41% of Internet users were engaged in 'social computing activities' through social networking sites such as blogs, online multi-player games, and photo and video sharing sites such as YouTube.

The social networking phenomenon is changing everyday ways of communicating and interacting and it could also play an important role in getting citizens involved in political and social debates.

The report discusses how social computing is changing our everyday lives as people use Internet social networking sites to participate more in education programmes outside work to improve their knowledge and skills, join online political or environmental organisations, sign online petitions and become involved in social and political debate. More involvement in social and business computer networking means that people can become more involved in the community, which could


particularly help groups at risk of social exclusion such as immigrants.

The report makes the point that in the next 10 to 20 years, social computing will have a huge effect on many areas of life including the innovation and development of new products and services, and helping to make companies more competitive as they can use social networking sites to publicise themselves, their products and ethics. More citizen involvement in social and public life may also lead to more transparency in government processes and greater empowerment for people.

The report highlights some of the risk involved in increased social computing such as the new 'digital divide' separating those with the skills and knowledge to fully benefit and those without. It also discusses the emerging threats to safety, security and privacy with regard to the large amounts of personal information that people are depositing on social networking sites.

Web 2.0 refers not to technical changes in the way that Web applications work, but to the expanding nature of what they are being used for. The Internet is now used by 1.7 billion people (24.7% of the world population). More than 160 million people every month are logging on to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and there are now over 100 million blogs with more than 100,000 new ones being created every day.


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