

# The ecological use of digital data

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**Abstract.** Sloweb promotes the fight against the consumeristic use of digital data, and an ecological approach to the use of digital data, particularly in the fields of private, personal data, stories and memories, but not limited to these areas.

## 1 Introduction

From the “Sloweb – Guide” [1]: *“in the world of the web 2.0, social networks, instant chats, selfies and mass storage clouds, the internet appears to have lost a large part of the positive values it once wanted to represent, and has become a huge market where buyers are sometimes aware of what they are doing, and sometimes not. It is one where they are constantly selling themselves, although unintentionally, a deep forest, an ill-famed place full of pickpockets and impostors, where we are offered “free” distractions in exchange for our behavioural data, our profiles and our interests. In this way, we give away our personal and browsing data to advertisers, allowing them to influence our daily life”*.

## 2 How the web is currently (ab)used

The web was actually born as a means to share our knowledge, a tool to support our freedom, empowerment and sociality. Despite these noble origins, as the web's own inventor Tim Berners-Lee recently stated, the impossibility of controlling our data, its management and its collection, now threatens the democratic nature of the internet and of our own society.

In fact, the web was certainly not born to become a commercial trap, but rather to be a tool to spread and share information and knowledge. It can (and should) be used to promote empowerment, to pursue freedom and to nurture our individual and collective growth.

We know it will not be easy to bring about this change, and we need to stop for a while, ask ourselves some important questions, think, call into doubt a good number of things and then, where needed, make an effort towards changing individual and collective behaviours in the use and development of technology and its innovative services.

We must make sure it is technology that serves our well-being, and be careful not to end up creating a modern digital oligarchy where it is humanity that serves some (small and often privileged) private technologies and multinational corporations, which aim at nothing but at maximising profits for the happy few. If we can just

manage to go back and exercise our right to organise our own time, to think, to choose and act according to our needs instead of responding to marketing strategies, then we have a great opportunity in front of us. It is not too late, yet it is not too soon.

## 3 The Sloweb Association

These thoughts and readings including M. Spitzer [1], E. Morozov [2], S. Turkle [3], F. Pasquale [4] and others, have prompted us to create an association – *Sloweb* – in order to promote greater responsibility in the use of the web and internet applications in general. Its activities include education and information to combat any private or public improper use of the internet and the web.

*Sloweb* asserts that the web is an extraordinary vehicle for knowledge, memories and quality information sharing, and acknowledges the endless opportunities and the huge potential that digital technologies offer, especially in facilitating the inclusion of challenged or disabled individuals.

We recognise that the use of information technologies involves a deep interaction with the irrational, emotional and unconscious side of human nature. In addition to the opportunities, however, there are risks and social phenomena that must be carefully assessed and, in specific cases, challenged.

*Sloweb* thus aims hence at opening to open a broad debate on the risks and opportunities of the web, promoting several information and education activities, and defining behaviour guidelines for companies and groups that operate through the internet or use web tools. Our final intent is to fight the improper use of the web by irresponsible organisations, firms and individuals. We gather people, companies, professionals and organisations that share its principles and aims, and promote information, dissemination and education activities towards an aware, responsible and community-oriented use of the web. By instructing our fellow citizens and raising awareness in institutions, we wish to increase the general commitment towards a shared awareness in the use, development and promotion of computer services.

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*Sloweb* promotes the fight against the consumeristic use of digital data, and promotes instead an ecological approach to the use of digital data, particularly, but not limited to, the field of private, personal data, stories and memories.

#### 4 The consumeristic use of digital data

Three main features define consumeristic use:

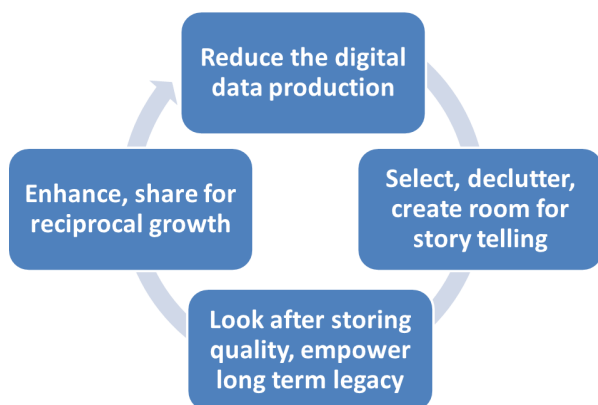
- social coercion inducing the use/abuse of digital devices. For example, the idea that you must own a smart phone, or be ashamed of not knowing the latest news concerning internet or the web use
- compulsive and expected sharing. When we see data, we do not stop to think about its quality. We do not select. We share, and our only thought is “with whom?” We “produce”
- the digital invasion of our time. Every single “free” second is now used to “catch up”, and we “produce” more, a lot of junky fat, continuously.

#### 5 Consequences

The consequences of these individual behaviours are serious for our whole society:

- we delegate our memory function to digital devices; and thus we do not exercise our memory any more. Civilisations which do not remember, do not survive
- we have lost intimacy and privacy, even the concept of “privacy rights”. This leads to the impossibility of any collective/individual rebellion
- the art of pausing and reflecting on the impact of our actions as a result of our "e-habit" has disappeared, resulting in a lost ability to manage new risks and new situations.

We must instead reconquer the right to think at our own pace, to think and reflect, while using fast technology. The issue is not a result of the intrinsic nature of the technology! The issue is due to the behaviours imposed on us. The reaction proposed by *Sloweb* involves the responsive use of the web.



**Fig. 1.** Ecological use of digital data.

#### 6 Conclusion and proposed approach: the ecological use of digital data

We propose the ecological use of digital personal data. The following proposals are as simple as the effective management of the life cycle of any material on this planet: reduction, selection, reuse, recycle. For instance, in our everyday practice, at home or at work:

- limit the production of content to the most essential; only send images that are necessary or useful, links whose potential is well explained, avoiding different types of distractions. Avoid wasting each other’s time, and producing, in the end, excessive carbon dioxide for the production of the electricity needed to run servers, telecommunications, devices
- select with care which contents are shared in order to create meaningful stories, whose messages are clear and useful for individual and collective growth. Teach each other how to throw away what is not needed, bearing in mind that keeping one picture on our smartphone requires a degree of electrical consumption, which in the end, when aggregated, is far from negligible. Travel light, and learn to declutter, to prepare a sort of separate collection of waste
- pay attention to formats and their obsolescence, respect what must be part of our cultural heritage; prepare yourself for your digital heritage, leaving what is meaningful, throwing away what would leave your loved ones in embarrassing situations and/or with impossible quantities of data - trash.

We should also consider including not only “digital alphabetisation”, but the even more important “digital education” in the training curriculums of schools for young students including, and not limited to, the concepts noted above.

#### References

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4. S. Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books (2011).
5. F. Pasquale, *The Black Box society: the secret algorithms that control money and information*, Harvard University Press (2015).