

Only connect

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Abstract It is supposedly easier to connect with other human beings in the era of ubiquitous technology. Connecting requires action and an element of risk taking in a context of dynamic uncertainty and incomplete information. The article explores what is involved in developing sustainable connections. We reflect on the context of “Socially Useful Artificial Intelligence”, the focus of the first article in issue 1.1.1987 of *AI & Society*, and explore subsequent research in a changing world. The arguments are illustrated through an account of the development of the Penny University, from a London coffee house to a potential international virtual institution.

Keywords Communication · Culture · Dialogue · Knowledge · Language · Penny University · Quality · Uncertainty

For “A Faustian Exchange: What is it to be human in the era of Ubiquitous Technology?”.

1 Introduction

The journal *AI & Society* was established at the same time as the *Artificial Intelligence for Society Club*, based in the UK, which had an ambitious agenda for socially useful applications of the new emerging technologies of Artificial Intelligence. There has been remarkable continuity at the editorial core of the journal over the last 25 years, despite

technological change. In particular, we need to come to terms with ubiquitous technology, not just in industrialised countries, but around the world, where it can take different forms. The anniversary provides an opportunity to look forward, informed by reflections on experience to date in the pursuit of Socially Useful Artificial Intelligence.

The *Artificial Intelligence for Society Club* was idealistic and driven by concerned computing professionals, partly motivated by the need to develop sustainable civil applications projects, at a time of major defence programmes (Ennals 1986). The challenges turned out to be much more complex than many members had realised. I have a vivid memory of a workshop presentation, at the London offices of a major charity, of state of the art tailored user interfaces for interactive advisory systems, where commercial system builders faced an audience of deaf blind users. The gaps to be bridged were profound and went well beyond the two-dimensional interface, extending to different conceptualisations of knowledge. We could not assume shared access to the spoken and written word.

2 Interpreting and changing the world

Twenty-five years later, we return to a similar agenda, chastened by the relative modesty of what has been achieved to date by contrast with ambitious goals, but with understanding derived from a broader research agenda and literature. As we consider, for example, the role of social technologies, we must recall that we are not the first to address these questions. Indeed, we might reflect that questions can themselves be regarded as social technologies.

The literature of Socio-Technical Systems thinking (Land 1982; Mumford 2006; Li 2011) reminds us that technology does not exist in isolation. Systems also involve

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