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## The Augmented Social Network: Building identity and trust into the next-generation Internet; (the need for a civil-society, not just commercial, solution)

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Could the next generation of online communications strengthen civil society by better connecting people to others with whom they share affinities, so they can more effectively exchange information and self-organize? Could such a system help to revitalize democracy in the 21st century? When networked personal computing was first developed, engineers concentrated on extending creativity among individuals and enhancing collaboration between a few. They did not much consider what social interaction among millions of Internet users would actually entail. It was thought that the Net's technical architecture need not address the issues of "personal identity" and "trust," since those matters tended to take care of themselves. This paper proposes the creation of an Augmented Social Network (ASN) that would build identity and trust into the architecture of the Internet, in the public interest, in order to facilitate introductions between people who share affinities or complementary capabilities across social networks.

### OBJECTIVES AND ELEMENTS

The ASN has three main **objectives**.

1. To create an Internet-wide system that enables more efficient and effective knowledge sharing between people across institutional, geographic, and social boundaries.
2. To establish a form of persistent online identity that supports the public commons and the values of civil society.
3. To enhance the ability of citizens to form relationships and self-organize around shared interests in communities of practice in order to better engage in the process of democratic governance.

In this paper we present a model for a next generation online community that can achieve these goals. In effect, the ASN proposes a form of "online citizenship" for the Information Age.

The ASN weaves together four distinct technical areas into components of an interdependent system. The four main elements of the ASN are: Persistent online identity; interoperability between communities; brokered relationships; and, public interest matching technologies. Each of these is discussed in a separate section in detail.

The four main **elements** of the ASN are:

1. Enabling individuals online to maintain a persistent identity as they move between different Internet communities, and to have personal control over that identity. This identity should be multifarious and ambiguous (as identity is in life itself), capable of reflecting an endless variety of interests, needs, desires, and relationships. It should not be reduced to a recitation of our purchase preferences, since who we are can not be reduced to what we buy.

2. **Interoperability Between Online Communities.** People should be able to cross easily between online communities under narrowly defined circumstances, just as in life we can move from one social network to another.
3. **Brokered Relationships.** Using databased information, online brokers (both automated and "live") should be able to facilitate the introduction between people who share affinities and/or complementary capabilities and are seeking to make connections . . . Such a system of brokered relationships should also enable people to find information or media that is of interest to them, through the recommendations of trusted third parties.
4. **Matching technologies** need to be broad and robust enough to include the full range of political discussion about issues of public interest. They should not be confined to commercial or narrowly academic topics; NGOs and other public interest entities need to be represented in the process that determines these matching technologies.

## IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLES

The intent of the ASN is to increase interconnectivity between people by enabling them to more easily find and share relevant relationships and information. Clearly, engendering trust in the system is critical to its success. To that end, it is necessary for the implementation of the ASN to be guided by principles that support such an environment of trust. These principles include:

- **Open Standards.** For this system to be broadly adopted, it must be transparent so that all of the entities that participate in it are reasonably assured of its trustworthiness. This means that the software code that enables the system should be non-proprietary and freely available, and that the process by which the software is written and the standards enacted should be open to the highest levels of scrutiny.
- **Interoperability.** Our vision is of an Internet with more bridges and fewer walls, where the individual can travel easily between communities. To enact this vision, online communities need to consider ways of being open to one another. Interoperability between diverse environments and ontological frameworks is central to this effort.
- **Inclusivity.** For the system to successfully draw in the largest possible number of participants, and to enable free connection between potential correspondents, it must be designed to embrace every online community that agrees to its standards and principles. In this regard, the ASN must be value-neutral, open, and inclusive, not unlike the open connectivity of the underlying Internet protocols.
- **Respect for Privacy.** The ASN should be a galvanizing force for the strengthening of privacy protections online, in support of a thriving civil society. Every person online must be certain that private information remains private, and that neither governments nor commercial interests will use this information in any way without the individual's knowledge and expressed permission.
- **Decentralization.** The Internet works best when systems are not commanded from the top down, but rather emerge from the bottom up — and are then adopted on a voluntary basis, in a manner that best suits the specific needs of the distinct communities that together comprise the Net's totality. We are in favor of an "opt-in" system, rather than one commanded by a government or commercial authority. For that reason, our approach is to develop software and standards that can be added to existing community operating systems in a modular fashion — so they do not have to rewrite their software from scratch, but rather can "plug-in" these modules to their existing infrastructures. Similarly, the ASN would support decentralized structures for the maintenance of persistent identity and ontological frameworks.