

## Rethinking digital object, Rethinking information relevance

- A philosophical approach towards the construction of digital objects

A Position Paper for the Future of Social Networking by  
Yuk Hui  
Centre for Cultural Studies/ Department of Computing  
Goldsmiths, University of London

### Background:

The definition of information relevance has been widely discussed and debated after the second world war, especially the perspectives of “relevance to a subject” (information the system evaluates as relevant) and “user relevance” (information the user needs). The information scientist, Saracevic in a paper titled “information science” in the Journal of the American Society for Information Science in 1999, summarises five types of relevance: “system or algorithmic relevance”; “topical or subject relevance”; “cognitive relevance or pertinence”; “situational relevance or utility”; “motivational or affective relevance”.

But mostly the information retrieval system only deals with the first type, “system or algorithmic relevance”, for the rest, Saracevic points out is a quest to the bottom of information retrieval<sup>1</sup>. How to think through relevance is the key to the design of information system, especially in the context of social networks. Since we are all looking for the ambient findability<sup>2</sup>. So to think how to design better information systems becomes a question of how to evaluate the relevance of data and metadata.

### Relation and Digital Object

The issue of relevance is critical at the moment when we are constructing an object, or philosophically the constructing what we think as real. This is expressed in the design of ontologies, which the semantic web largely relies on.

Traditionally in knowledge representation, an object is represented by its **properties**, for example, the metadata of a book, is expressed through different attributes like <dc:author>, <dc:title>, etc. But this is limited in the sense that we are still considering firstly the object is real in the sense of naïve realism, secondly we still confine our thinking in a closed and isolated domain. And this is not appropriate when we are considering the web. I am trying to develop a philosophical approach towards the understanding of digital object through **relations**.

And here we confront a concept of relation typically defined by sociologists (especially those focus on quantitative research) as inter-personal relations, and this is probably the dominant view in social network studies as well<sup>3</sup>. By rejecting this inadequate understanding, I will explore the concept of relations proposed by **David**

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette M. Sabre, “relevance” in information retrieval, [www.personal.psu.edu/jms19/pdf/sabre\\_relevance.pdf](http://www.personal.psu.edu/jms19/pdf/sabre_relevance.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Morville, Ambient Findability: What We Find Changes Who We Become, O'Reilly Media, Inc, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mika, Social Networks and the Semantic Web (Semantic Web and Beyond). Springer, 2007

**Hume** in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, where he distinguishes two relations, one called natural relations and another called philosophical relations. I will further develop the latter. This concept of relation is much broader, and it is more fundamental for the understanding of the idea of social and network, which is constituted through the association of objects rather than human agencies.

This is a theoretical approach still under progress, and I hope it is able to provide a broader framework for computer scientists and philosophers to rethink what is a digital object in the context of social networks, as well as to push the concept forward to improve the information relevance when designing an application.