Prospects, Challenges and Limits to User-Centric Approaches in the Digital Information Society

The aim of EuroCPR2014 is to examine whether user-centric European information society policies are serving the interests of the (European) consumers/citizens, whether the rhetoric of European information society policy is aligned with implementation, and how user-centric policies can better inform market practice and policy making. What is the contribution of users to our information society/economy and how can this be integrated in research, business decisions, policy making, and especially in multi-stakeholder approaches?

The evolution towards a digital society or knowledge economy has often revolved around economic and technological questions and the effects of national and transnational policies on European industry. Economic growth was and still is the focal point of most European policies. The standard assumption was that growth would automatically benefit consumers and, hence, citizens and public interests were served.

In recent years we have witnessed a strong and almost euphoric focus on the user as the possible source of many innovative and revolutionary projects as well as ideas and business models. This has reinvigorated interdisciplinary research on users in relation to digital media developments, government policies and industry strategies. This perspective is a substantive scholarly tradition in disciplines like science and technology studies (STS), innovation economics, and consumer sociology.

There is little doubt that the user is a central figure in the digital society. Active users are a source of creative inspiration and avid creators of cultural resources. Bloggers and citizen journalists reflect critically on the world around them and have become acknowledged sources of information. As enthusiastic consumers of digital content services and products, users are the inspiration for a flourishing creative economy and they fuel the globalization of information markets. At the same time, user empowerment can turn into disempowerment. This happens when users become the play thing of complex digital systems, designed and applied to facilitate unfair business practices or objectionable forms of government surveillance.

To further the emancipation of the user and to prevent user disempowerment, businesses, policy makers, civil society, and academics grapple with the challenge of accommodating users interests and integrating a more user-centric perspective into their decision making, technologies and research. This is not easy and it
can challenge professional routines, established research methods and familiar approaches to law and policy making. It requires a better understanding of who “the user” actually is, what her/his different roles are and the measurable contributions she/he makes within the media ecosystem, and how this position can be strengthened.

Causal relations among the economy, technology, and the wider society are unpredictable. Consumer interests – though at the core of European information society rhetoric – are often neglected in policies. EU policies remain focused on supply-side measures, with little attention being devoted to demand-side issues. The fragmentation of policy issues oriented to consumer interests over several European Commission Directorate-Generals and government departments of Member States reinforces this neglect.

**We invite papers addressing the following questions:**

- What are the uncertainties and challenges in integrating the user in business and politics in the digital society? Is there a paradox between an information and digital society and user empowerment?

- How are services and business models taking users into account? Are they able to respect users’ expectations and be commercially and socially viable?

- What are the limits to user-centric policies? How are these assessed in the light of the desirability of letting the user determine the agenda?

- How can demand-side policies centered on users improve the unsatisfactory performance of existing supply-side EU policies?

- How can we assess user awareness, motivation, capabilities and practices?

- What characterizes an active user? What responsibilities does this imply?

- Is the user empowered or dis-empowered, and in what way does the complexity of the design, affordances and algorithms of complex digital systems influence user empowerment?

- How do we open the “black box” of users through research that takes account of conflicting user interests?

- How do social media/ubiquitous media (e.g. Internet-of-Things) relate to the (dis)empowerment of consumers and citizens? Does
user-centered design interfere with personal freedoms such as privacy, freedom of expression, personal autonomy?

- Have users’ voices increased and what is the impact; who is listening?

- How is the economic crisis affecting users with regard to the take up of digital services? Is the economic crisis an impediment or an opportunity for user empowerment? Is the digital society enabling the user to engage in novel behaviours or is it restricting access and creating new divides?

- What conceptual/analytical frameworks are best able to encourage user-oriented policies?

**Note:** The call for abstracts is aimed at attracting papers, which address conceptual/theoretical/empirical issues and issues that are clearly relevant to policy makers and business.

We welcome papers that reflect on the business/policy and policy/legal dimensions of the topics listed above as well as on their societal and economic implications.

Papers relevant to the overall conference theme, but not directly related to the suggested topics will be considered in the blind peer review assessment of the scientific committee as well.