Cyber Challenges to International Human Rights

Title: "Serendipity by Design": Value Sensitive Design (VSD) Approach

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Abstract:
Personalization of online content creates filter bubbles and reinforces echo chambers. These are driven not only by natural human behaviors (selective exposure and homophily) but also by design choices and efficency-driven recommender systems. The traditional media policy goal of exposing citizens to diverse information to protect pluralism has not found its concrete application on Social Media yet. This is increasingly problematic considering that the usage of social media as a news source is advancing, as well as personalization' sophistication and group polarization. Based on Value Sensitive Design (VSD) approach, the paper suggests "serendipity by design" as an alternative prospective policy goal. Indeed, serendipity – considered both as a capability and a process of seeking and processing unexpected and surprising information – requires novel and diverse information as preconditions as well as it causes cognitive diversity. By being both limited and cultivated in the digital environment, the research reveals a theoretical trade-off between serendipity and relevance that might indeed be tackled with structural and informational nudging. Yet, serendipity as a design principle might encompass all the phases of production and consumption of information (seeking, encountering and processing information) representing a positive freedom valuable from an epistemological, psychological and political perspective. The paper eventually attempts to frame a preliminary theoretical and methodological approach to its design as an alternative social media policy goal.