

# Special Interest Group on Social Navigation

Alan Wexelblat

MIT Media Lab

20 Ames St

Cambridge, MA 02139 USA

+1 617 253 9833

wex@media.mit.edu

## ABSTRACT

Social navigation is the process of using information from other people to find things. These things may be locations, recommendations, or contacts with people. Several research projects in this area have been undertaken in recent years, but these efforts have been dispersed and uncoordinated. The goal of this SIG is to open a dialog among researchers in this area and begin a process of research sharing which has so far been absent.

## Keywords

navigation, information filtering, recommendation

## INTRODUCTION

The process we call social navigation is probably as old as society itself. We have always relied on others to help us find things of interest, to help us find our way around, and to introduce us to people we don't know. Social navigation interfaces and systems try to bring these cooperative processes to the world of computer networks and digital information. The primary use of social navigation in both these realms is to cut through the clutter, connecting people with the right information or other people even when there are potentially a large number of distracting alternatives.

## SCOPE

Social navigation is an umbrella term that encompasses at least three related areas:

- Information recommendation;
- Information filtering;
- Information navigation;
- Personal introduction.

The common theme in all these areas is that others use information collected from one or more other persons in the selection process. In *recommendation*, people contribute opinions or ratings and those ratings are used to filter an input stream such as Usenet news. In *filtering*, people act as editors for each other, constructing new streams of information out of other streams thereby improving the

signal-to-noise ratio. In *navigation*, people provide signs or other directional information to help people find and understand locations or paths of interest.

In *introduction*, people help each other meet appropriate other persons.

## ISSUES

The most important issues in social navigation revolve around the collection and dissemination of the information used. In many cases, the information is *potentially quite sensitive*; for example, peoples' opinions of others. In other cases, collecting information -- such as getting people to rate news articles they read -- can be intrusive. Interface designers need to find ways to collect information in easy, unobtrusive ways and to protect that information once it is collected.

In particular, it is not always possible to assume that information will stay within some pre-defined boundary, such as a workgroup. Social navigation systems are often designed to work for and across large communities of heterogeneous users. This heterogeneity also poses problems in itself: if it is hard or impossible to characterize users of a social navigation system narrowly, it is more difficult to design an interface that meets their needs.

These issues are not entirely unique to social navigation systems, but designers of these interfaces are in the forefront of facing these problems.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the existence of a number of research prototype systems for social navigation, there has been little cooperative effort among researchers in this area. As computers move out of office applications and into communications, communities, and home-based applications, social navigation ideas are going to find wider use.

For this to be realistic, however, we must attack basic problems and find common definitions so that we can stand on each other's shoulders instead of each other's toes.