

Researchers explore the impact of social networking on shyness

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Have you ever cancelled a Facebook status update when you thought about who would see it, or switched off your phone to avoid an awkward call?

Researchers at the University of Sussex are working on how we can engage with the [digital revolution](#) without holding our lives up for scrutiny.

Dr Dan Chalmers, who is a senior lecturer in the School of Informatics at the University of Sussex is leading the project.

Feelings of incompetence, shyness and [embarrassment](#) can be exacerbated by the demands of social media, Dr Chalmers says. "This project is about looking to the future, the pervasive computing vision and the importance of 'control', because there could be an awful lot of information out there about you.

"Most people feel shy in some situations and lack of control over how we present ourselves, when we choose to engage and what we choose to reveal, contribute to this. Allowing users of the latest technology, (such as social networks, interactive learning environments and mobile services) to regain this control may make them more widely acceptable and beneficial."

Dr Susie Scott, [sociologist](#) and shyness expert at the University of Sussex, is jointly leading the project into ways to combat the epidemic

of shyness that technology might evoke, she says:

"The sociology team on the project is asking whether it is ethical and appropriate for new technologies to be forcing people to interact and perform more, and whether these new devices are a good thing. Our stance is that shyness is not a problem, or an individual's fault, but rather a normal reaction to stressful social situations, such as interactive art gallery exhibitions that require visitors to 'perform' in some way.

"We are interested in critically examining why these technologies have been developed and how they create [social anxiety](#) in many people, not just a minority of 'poor, unfortunate' shy people. We are also critical of the way in which contemporary western culture problematises shyness and makes people think of it as a problem to be overcome. In contrast, we think there is nothing wrong with being shy, and are interested in people who dislike or resist the imposition of these new technologies, because they just want to be left alone!"

There are several sub-groups within the project each investigating a different element of 'social technology' such as:

- a digital game of hide-and-seek using GPS technology. Can a player choose to reveal their location, shopping habits or clothing to some people and not to others;
- the current trend for interactive guides in art galleries. What would happen if art lovers had more control over this interaction;
- special sensor clothing - a jacket that will respond to facial expressions; Artist Anna Dumitriu is planning works of art using a sensory table that will show whether she is feeling awkward and challenged by questions.

Project leader Dr Dan Chalmers said: "We are interested in trying to find ways of using the very latest technology to provide tools for people to either manage their way around situations that would cause them to feel shy or to present themselves in a way that they don't feel under pressure to interact." The research will explore whether computers can identify situations that evoke [shyness](#) for particular users, and start to put together tools that can help people either avoid them or cope - as they choose.

Provided by University of Sussex

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