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Phyrtual.org
A Vision and Website for Social Innovation

Alfonso Molina



Professor of Technology Strategy
The University of Edinburgh (UK)

Scientific Director
Fondazione Mondo Digitale (Italy)

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“People are clamouring for ways to use social media for social change” (Aaker and Smith, 2011,p.31)

Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organizations (Kania and Kramer, 2011, p36)

Keywords: Phyrtual (physical + virtual), open vision development, human multi-dimensionality, evolutionary empowerment, apps libraries, multi-level project clustering, responsible citizenship profiling, empowerment-unity, *global social innovation utility*.

The Winter 2011 issue of the Stanford Social Innovation Review has two articles that identify precisely two of the key challenges facing social innovation today (see quotations above). The present article describes a vision and a website that propose one possible answer to these two challenges.

Social Innovation

Social innovation is defined here in broad terms as change for the benefit of society as a whole or for the most disadvantaged segments of its population. This implies that the prime driver of the change process is the improvement in people's lives. All other drivers are strategically subordinated. Social innovation is not the exclusive province of a single sector in society (e.g., the social sector), it may be initiated in any sector, i.e., social, forprofit, government or community sector. In addition, single organization may be involved in several different processes of social innovation, thus, there is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship between the organization and processes of social innovation. In fact, concrete organizations may adopt different organizational forms in different social innovations and, in some cases, even different forms in a single process of social innovation. In addition, increasingly in a globalizing world, processes of social innovation are multi-organizational and multi-sectoral due to the magnitude and complexity of the issues to be tackled.

In short, the focus on social innovation with its multiple forms of organizational participation provides a fruitful approach to Kania and Kramer (2011)'s problem: *“Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination...”* Aaker and Smith (2011)'s problem: *“ways to use social media for social change”* is to large extent complementary and requires ways of seeing social

innovation as processes that integrate physical and virtual dimensions into a single *Phyrtual* vision, strategy and set of activities (physical + virtual = phyrtual).

The origins of www.Phyrtual.org

The origins of Phyrtual.org predate the popularity of the term social innovation and, indeed, of the term phyrtual. The first ideas on the need to have access to some online environment for innovation projects related to work carried out on digital inclusion (e-inclusion) by the Digital Youth Consortium (Consortio Gioventù Digitale), a small organization devoted to ICT-based innovation for schools and disadvantaged social groups in Italy. At the time, first half of 2000s, the Consortium organized an international gathering to promote the dream of a Global e-Inclusion Movement (GeM) and, contemporarily, the world gathered for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva and Tunis. Both of these events were focused on the idea of movements to tackle the challenge of the digital divide, or, more positively, e-inclusion. The effervescence created by the two physical events -of course in their widely different scales- did not lead to continued collaborative action by participants. This stimulated big questions: Why did people not take a further step after the meetings? What is missing for this to happen? What possibilities do exist to enhance the chances of this happening? These are questions that do not have simple answers, since multiple factors play a part. The Consortium began to explore the possibility of online alternatives within the open source software movement but the first attempts did not bear fruits.

In 2006, the Consortium became the Fondazione Mondo Digitale (FMD) (www.mondodigitale.org) and the need for a virtual environment for ICT-based innovations for the benefit schools and disadvantaged people became more urgent, this time for the very work of the Foundation. The FMD was working on processes of transfer and scaling-up of ICT-based didactical innovations in the school sector. A programme called Educational Weeks was in place aimed at socializing good-practices in the didactical use of ICTs among Rome's schools. The FMD identified and researched the good-practices and every week one good-practice became the centre a set of activities happening inside an educational centre located in the periphery of the City of Rome. Teachers and students of the leading and the learning schools worked together sharing knowledge and experiences related to the good practice. For the FMD, this territorially-based programme of activities became known as the *physical innovation environment* (*p-innovation environment*).

As each good-practice, however, could only stay one week in the *p-innovation environment*, soon the limitation for the scaling up of each innovation became apparent and frustrating. One week in one place was clearly too short. This imposed time and space barriers that dramatically affected the effectiveness of the programme. There was a need to break the barriers of time and space and expand the one-week programme in the *p-innovation environment* to an any-time, anywhere programme that also happened in a *virtual innovation environment (e-innovation environment)*. The latter environment was “conceived to serve the effectiveness of actions on the ground, in the physical world of people's trying to improve themselves and the world through education, innovation and inclusion.” (Molina, 2007, p.107). It was defined as

a stimulating environment of rich interactions and joint-learning among organizations and people driving targeted, grass-root processes of ICT-based innovation and e-inclusion. It defined the nature of this environment as *phyrtual*, that is, integrating physical (in the territory) and virtual activities into a single programmatic and flexible framework of activities, learning and change. (ibid., p.106).

Box 1 lists the characteristics at the time identified as essential to the envisaged *e-innovation environment*.

BOX 1. Envisaged Characteristics of a Virtual Innovation Environment

The structure of an e-Innovation environment is multi-faceted since its purpose is to support grass-root innovation processes that enhance the quality of people's lives. The realization of such change-oriented environment requires the structuring of multiple aspects. In particular:

- online platform with all the required functionalities and content to facilitate the creation and/or improvements of concrete social and educational processes
- flows of human, financial, material (tangible and intangible), time and space resources. Here human resources include not just knowledge and expertise but also reputation, values and feelings such as solidarity, fraternity, equality, compassion, unity, etc.
- strategic thinking, understanding and support of digital literacy and innovation processes, resulting in collaborative strategy-making and resource-finding aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of such processes.
- instrumentalization and operationalization of scientific understanding on the nature of ICT-based innovation processes to facilitate collaborative learning, strategy-making and constituency-building of grass-root processes.
- mechanisms and processes enabling social and educational innovators to do both: (i) contribute structured knowledge, lessons and information about the nature and state of development of their processes, and (ii)

initiate collaborative strategy-making and constituency-building actions around their processes.

- communities of people capable and willing to provide collaborative support to grass-root processes.
- promotion and exploitation of synergies between the many different grass-root efforts and processes for mutual benefit and for the strengthening of a programmatic movement realizing the scaling-up of good practices

Source. Molina (2007), p.107.

Architecture of www.Phyrtual.org

The first half of 2011 sees the arrival of the *beta* version of Phyrtual.org on the Internet. In fact, Phyrtual had been online for most of 2010 but “silently.” It is only now that people and organizations working for social innovation may begin to interact with it. It is a start and surely there is a lot to do and learn, especially because the dream behind the website is very ambitious: to see the benefits of knowledge, new technologies, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship reaching all peoples in the planet without discrimination of any kind. A profound desire to serve and enrich people’s lives is in the DNA of Phyrtual, hence its aim to stimulate and facilitate the creation and widespread diffusion of projects and experiences of social innovation. In Phyrtual, the ultimate empowerment challenge posed to social innovation projects is to facilitate a process whereby people at risk of exclusion from the knowledge society become creators and innovators of their own future. Since this challenges us to be much more than mere *homo consumens* (Bauman, 2007), in cultural terms, Phyrtual can be seen as an experiential social learning environment where people practice routinely their rich and positive multi-dimensionality.

In Phyrtual.org, people and organizations can explore, find, and participate in social innovations; above all, they can join and collaborate with other people and organizations to create, share and grow their ideas, knowledge, and communities, around projects in social areas such as education, health, poverty-elimination, active ageing, independent living, community development and countless others. For this purpose, the Phyrtual’s architecture has **projects, people and institutions** as the fundamental working units. All other aspects are subordinated to them: navigation, content, instruments, etc.

Phyrtual Home Page

Figure 1 shows the Phyrtual Home Page. The top marked area is dedicated to communicating the vision through videos and phrases. This area introduces the concept of *open vision development* since it is open to video contributions from anybody who may have something exciting to add to the vision of Phyrtual. The purpose is to maintain the vision always creative and challenging through a process of collaborative vision making. The “Sign up” and “Donations” buttons are also found in this area. Donation is central to the Phyrtual income-raising model (“*crowd financing*”). Eventually, it will be extended to all projects inside Phyrtual (*i.e., diffuse crowd financing*).



Figure 1. Phyrtual Home Page

The middle area is dedicated to “Searching” the website. Searches can be by projects, people, institutions and countries. The bottom marked area is dedicated to “selected projects.” This area houses project Phyrtual, treated as one project inside the Phyrtual.org. Other projects are selected according criteria of merit or novelty, for instance, most active project, most visited project, most recent project.

Phyrtual Project Working Area

Figure 2 shows the Phyrtual working page dedicated to the social innovation project. This page is the window into a range of functionality offered to people and organizations working to advance social innovations at any stage of their development (e.g., idea, project, programme, movement, etc). Several concepts are central to the operation of this area:

- *human multi-dimensionality*: the recognition that people are multi-dimensional and Phyrtual.org must facilitate the development and communication of social innovation projects in the ways their participants wish. Phyrtual.org offers many fields broadly organizes into knowledge, arts, fun, and others can be added;
- *evolutionary empowerment*: the recognition that empowerment is an evolutionary capacity-building process and Phyrtual.org must facilitate the creation of multiple learning flows and paths for people participating in social innovation projects. Phyrtual offers a configurable project working-page to enable social innovators to start from the simplest concepts/activities and evolve towards activities with greater capacity-building results, ideally reaching the ultimate empowerment challenge to make creators and innovators of people who are at risk of exclusion from the knowledge society.
- *apps libraries*: the recognition that one of the crucial ways people can contribute to social innovation globally is through the offer of *instruments* and, more generally, applications (*apps*) useful for social innovation projects. Phyrtual.org offers a special area dedicated to instruments of communication, collaboration, productivity, and evaluation. Furthermore, the entire social innovation environment and its multiple fields constitute an environment for distributed *apps libraries*.
- *Multi-level project clustering*: the possibility to cluster projects into groups, thus facilitating the presence of programmes and initiatives made up of multiple projects. This multi-level clustering implies the possibility of scoping the aggregations of entities (e.g., projects, programmes, initiative, etc.) towards ever-higher levels – from micro to macro operations. The configurability of the project working-page makes this possible to the extent that any

initiative or programme clustering projects, or, clustering other programmes or initiatives can themselves be treated as particular forms of projects.

Let's see the realization of these concepts in the project working space. The top marked area is for the "Project Name" (title and subtitle). The middle-left marked area "Fast K" stands for "fast knowledge" a term adopted for all those knowledge objects that communicate something rather rapidly, such as short news, pictures, short videos, quick polls, etc. Most of these items are quick to produce and communicate. At the bottom-left side, there is another form of "fast knowledge" in the "Update" section containing the activity record of the project. Moving to the right, at the top is "Deep K" that stands for "deep knowledge" because people developing social innovation projects find here an ensemble of knowledge fields offering diverse possibilities to communicate and grow their projects. These knowledge spaces include: concept, development plan, case studies, stories, creative ideas, testimonials, resources, lessons of best practice and wisdom.

All these knowledge fields may look like a daunting amount of work for projects. But this is where *evolutionary empowerment* comes to play. Through the configurability of the working environment (i.e., only those fields with content are shown), the knowledge fields can be the simplest or fullest combination, in accordance with the requirements and evolution of the project. This configurability is useful particularly for social innovation projects that have little time or resources to formalize the knowledge they gain from their experiences. Other projects at early stages may see in the full set of knowledge fields a kind of guide as well as a goal for the types of knowledge to be developed in order to gain both a better strategic understanding of the project and a more powerful communication platform. Another configurability feature aimed at facilitating *evolutionary empowerment* is found inside the knowledge fields "development plan," "stories" and "case studies." Here people can find a free-style alternative as well as a template: the free-style space is for people wanting to communicate their project's knowledge in their own ways; while the template is for people benefitting from a structured guide to communicating the knowledge of their projects. Many templates are possible and people who have developed their own are encouraged to donate them to Phyrtual.org to increase the richness of offer for other projects. Initially, the number of templates is very humble. In time, this area is envisaged to grow into a *template library* or, more generally, *apps library* to support better the requirements of so many types of projects.

Inside the "creative ideas" field, a different kind of instrument is found since this is a space for collective creativity separated into "incremental improvements" and "crazy ideas" with potentially

radical impact in the life of the project. Initially, in this field, people can propose ideas that can be voted and listed by vote ranking. This simplest of mechanisms produces a ranking of the most popular ideas inside the project.



Figure 2. Phyrtual Working Area I – The Project

There is a need to go further, however, because the most popular idea is not necessarily the most convenient for implementation by the project. The second level of assessment must be based on more quality-oriented criteria such as technical feasibility, cost/benefit, user-friendliness, etc., depending on the nature of the project. Indeed, there are many possible creativity tools and, again, the expectation is an evolution of the field into an *apps library*. All remaining knowledge fields offer in principle potential to develop into *apps libraries*. They are all to be invented.

At this point, the aspect of *human multi-dimensionality* enters the scene through the areas of “Arts” and “Fun” in the project working-environment. As said earlier, people are multi-dimensional and some may wish to develop and communicate their social innovation projects in ways other than formal knowledge. They may choose artistic forms for their projects: poetry, songs, dance, etc. Others may wish to do it through fun (e.g., games, jokes, cartoons, funny pictures, etc.) to communicate, for instance, messages and ideas with sense of humour. Phyrtual aspires to satisfy this multi-dimensionality of creation and expression and this is the reason for the areas “Arts” and “Fun” (and maybe others later on). The application of configurability facilitates the identification of the most suitable combinations of the areas of knowledge, arts and fun, relative to the requirements and stage of evolution of every project.

After “Arts” and “Fun” comes the area of “Tools.” This is dedicated to furnish projects with four sub-areas of tools or apps: communication, collaboration, productivity and evaluation. The four sub-areas house a mix of native Drupal tools and external tools. The native Drupal tools are fully integrated to the Phyrtual website, while the external tools imply entering into another environment. The ideal situation is to have all tools integrated and available inside the Phyrtual environment, but this is not possible if Phyrtual is to provide access to all useful freely available instrumentation. In the Phyrtual vision, all four-tool sub-areas are envisaged to grow into *apps libraries* of functionality and projects will be able to choose the most appropriate for their needs and tastes.

Today, it is just the start and, under “communication,” the website contains the native Drupal tool “Blog” and the external tool “Skype” and others will be added as people begin to share their tools or their knowledge of existing tools. The sub-area of “collaboration” contains “Wiki” and “Book” – two native Drupal tools- but other tools such as online whiteboard may be added in freely available versions of software. The sub-area of “productivity” contains the external conceptual mapping tool “CMap” and the last area of “evaluation” is dedicated to two levels of evaluations tools under

development, both native and external. The first is for collective evaluation of projects activities by those stakeholders participating in them (e.g., courses, events, etc.). The second is for the strategic evaluation of the strength and weaknesses of the overall social innovation process. The first level is to learn and improve the performance of specific activities inside the project; the second level is to evaluate the strategic evolution of the project. Each level of evaluation is useful on its own, but the sum of the two is the most powerful option. An important functionality to be achieved in this area of “evaluation” is automatic data processing and graphic representation, especially for projects that grow into sizeable communities and implement collective real-time evaluations. At the Fondazione Mondo Digitale work is happening to make a contribution at the two levels and it is envisaged that other people and organizations may also do so. Eventually, as the concept of *apps library* develops in all these sub-areas, projects will be able to make increasingly finely tuned choices of the tools and functionality that suit them most.

Moving further down to the area “People,” “Institutions” and “Projects,” Phyrtual offers a social network dimension for the visible build up of the constituency of people and institutions making a reality of a particular social innovation project. The vision of Phyrtual is that any social-innovation idea has the potential to become a programmatic movement. If the growth of this movement is visible, this helps communicate the living human/organizational dimension of the project. This means that all people and institutions playing a role in the social innovation project should -if they wish- be visible to the world with their own profiling. In addition, the button “Projects” makes visible multi-level clusters of projects, that is, projects, programmes or initiatives made up of a number of projects or even sub-programmes. Such wide visibility of all areas of a social innovation project or programme (e.g., knowledge, arts, fun and people/institutions/project clusters) has an important strategic consequence, since it should act as an “open window” into the growth, dynamism and depth of such a project or programme. In this way, the success and scaling up of a particular social innovation can be largely visible for all to see, judge and, indeed, to participate. Such new possibility is likely to have a significant impact on processes of evaluation and even funding of social-innovation projects and programmes.

Finally at the bottom of the project working-page, there are three areas facilitating searches and project visibility at the level of the entire Phyrtual community. The first two: “Search” and “Selected Projects” are the same as for the Home Page. The third area “Random Projects” shows projects without any particular criteria in a way that favours serendipitous findings and even alliances.

User Personal Working Page – Person or Institution

Next in the discussion is the *user page* for either a “person” or an “institution.” This *user page* is a second-level working area since it enables the personal or institutional users to do both: (a) present their general profile information, and b) present and access all their social-innovation projects, be those they have created, be those they have chosen to join in. Of course, by accessing the projects, they can also access all the people inside the projects, thus establishing a navigational connection between the “personal” and “institutional” working areas. This approach allows people and institutions to present a unique profile to any user searching and navigating through the Phyrtual website. In particular, this unique profile through the lens of social innovation is one of *social responsibility* or *responsible citizenship* (i.e., *responsible citizenship profiling*) personally or organizationally, locally or globally, in loose or close partnerships and so on. Obviously, those people and organizations having their own websites will be able to link them to Phyrtual for a total profiling.

Figure 3 shows the fields of the *user page* for the case of an “institution” (the page for a “person” has a similar format). The top-left marked area contains the “Institution’s Account,” “Messages” and “Relationships.” From these three sub-areas the user can manage the content and presentation of its own account, all messages sent and received, and friends, colleagues and relationship requests. At the same level, the user can also create a new project, and moving further to the right the user finds a space to write a short message (or thought) for all those visiting the profile page. Next below is the space “Profile Information” containing the user profiling (person or institution). This profile information can also be accessed through the icon next to the picture. Immediately below “profile “information” is the space “Projects.” This space allows users to manage their projects directly from their institutional (or personal) pages. Here users can have access to both their own projects (i.e., projects they have created) and projects in which they have decided to participate (i.e., created by others).

Further down “Projects,” the next two spaces are “Relationships” and “Comments.” “Relationships” is the space showing the user’s friends and colleagues and facilitating access to their profiles. Since users can search the Phyrtual website by people and institutions, they can actively invite and help grow the number of friends and colleagues in a project. The space “Comments” maintains the record of comments made by the user and their friends and colleagues.

Finally, the bottom of the user working-page shows again the three areas facilitating searches and project visibility at the level of the entire Phyrtual community: “Search,” “Selected Projects” and “Random Projects.”

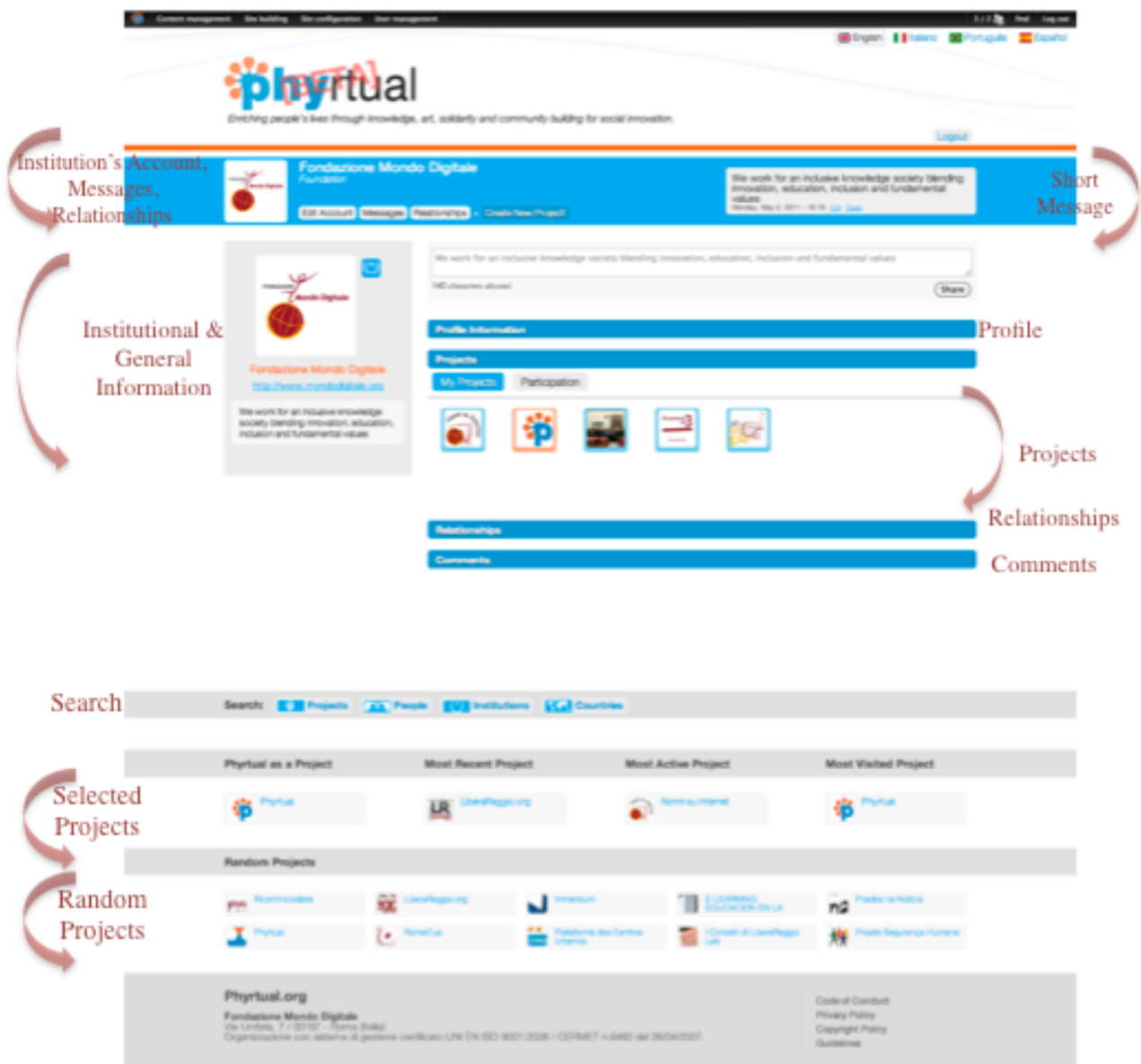


Figure 3. Phyrtual Working Area II – The User’s Page (Institution or Person)

Other Key Elements of the Phyrtual Vision and Governance

The goal is to see Phyrtual.org becoming the home for many social innovation projects, a home where people can nurture their dreams of social innovation in ways that are fully inclusive of all

those contributing to it, be it as designers, users, sponsors, volunteers, supporters and so on. In this sense, Phyrtual.org is an environment for open and collective social innovation, that is, an online environment in which every project is challenged to become a social innovation movement and every participant to become an innovator.

In Phyrtual.org, social innovation can empower people and communities through the pursuit of flexible and evolutionary configurations of knowledge, wisdom, arts, fun, positive emotions and values, community building and supporting instrumentation for all these aspects. True, as human beings, all of us are a “battlefield” between positive and negative aspects and it will not be easy to maintain Phyrtual.org always and purely on the positive side. This is the aspiration, however, in the understanding that the will to learn and improve continuously is critical. After all, mistakes and falls are all part of the life journey, the key is to learn and stand up again and again on the side of the positive traits of humanity. Phyrtual intends to be an environment favouring the individual and collective growth of these positive traits in the “battlefield” of humanity. From this point of view, as said earlier, Phyrtual can be seen as an active, experiential, social learning environment.

Empowerment and unity are two keywords in the governance of Phyrtual.

Empowerment is the will and ability of people to shape their own future through the release of their creative and innovative energies. Phyrtual pursues empowerment for all and, particularly, the weakest sectors of the population.

Unity is the will and ability of people to learn and work together to multiply the forces of creation, development, diffusion, implementation, and impact of social innovations.

These principles of *empowerment* and *unity* inform the content of Phyrtual governance and development policy and, hence the model of participation by individuals and organizations. Empowerment and unity, however, need careful treatment to avoid tension. For instance, in their extreme expressions, *empowerment* may be understood as complete autonomy of decision without reference to others; while *unity* may be understood as no autonomy of decision without the consent of others. Phyrtual strives for the best balance between the two, so that unity and empowerment act as mutually reinforcing forces of social innovation.

Thus, Phyrtual is open to all individuals and organizations involved in one way or another in the development of social innovation projects. The condition is to register in the website and respect its codes of conduct, privacy, copyright. At the level of social innovation projects, Phyrtual allows for a complete autonomy of content and governance. Indeed, projects leaders, managers and participants are free to choose the governance of interactions and activities inside their own projects. For this purpose, the website offers the project-community the possibility to configure in different forms the interaction among its members.

Furthermore, under certain conditions, Phyrtual' administrators may license it to organizations using it exclusively for social innovation. These organizations will have autonomy of development for localization, culturalization, and the addition of new functionality. This autonomy, however, should not lead to fragmentation of the Phyrtual constituency, it must actually enrich it and enhance it. Thus, some "unity" conditions may include: (a) obligation to show visibly that the website is part of the Phyrtual community, through, for instance, the use of the Phyrtual logo and name; (b) obligation to maintain connectivity with the original Phyrtual.org website (*federative approach*); (c) obligation to make freely available to Phyrtual.org any new functionality that may help enhance the social innovations pursued by other members of the Phyrtual community. At all times, anybody can contribute ideas, instruments and functionality to enhance the operation of all projects in Phyrtual.org. The result is expected to lead to the emergence of a kind of utility for social innovation projects worldwide: a *global social innovation utility*.

There are two possibilities of federated autonomous websites: thematic and geographic-linguistic. Thematic websites are content-focused and do not have geographic-linguistic limitation. Geographic sites are location-and-linguistically focused and do not have limitations of content. The combination of the two is Phyrtual.org with no limitation of content or geography-language. Federated autonomous websites would coordinate with Phyrtual.org so as to avoid harmful fragmentation and reinforce the advantages of unity.

Considering the Physical Dimension of Social Innovation

So far the focus has been on the Phyrtual online environment. Processes of social innovation seeking to improve the lives of people, however, do not happen only in the virtual world of Internet. They imply social processes and changes that have a real existence in the physical world. The unity, the integration, of these two worlds, physical-virtual or simply *phyrtual*, is the most effective way

to advance processes of social innovation. The name *Phyrtual* was chosen on purpose to remind us that the web environment exists to complement physical environments where the ultimate results of social innovation will become most visible. It is also an invitation to shift strategic thinking for social innovation processes from strategies that are either predominantly “physical” (territorial) or predominantly “virtual” (online). Today, strategic thinking has the possibility to be “phyrtual,” that is, one single strategic approach blending the best the physical/virtual world has to offer.

Phyrtual.org is at the beginning of a journey and, if successful, the path forward will be defined and invented by the social innovators who will make it their own. In the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: “caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar” (“traveller there is no path, the path is made as you go”). I just wish to add: “hace falta creer en un mayor destino y tener la voluntad de dar” (“we must believe in a better future, and have the will to give”). Today, following its incubation inside the Fondazione Mondo Digitale, Phyrtual is entering the path of starting up a proper enterprise (e.g., technology, financing, marketing, R&D, etc.). Individuals and organizations wishing to play a part in the ad-venture may send their comments and suggestions to A.Molina@phyrtual.org.

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