

Click to Enter

HOW LOCAL CONSCIOUSNESS THRIVES WITHIN A GLOBAL MEANS

In the realm of digital media, a new systematic approach to local level interventions has allowed unique, bottom-up, user-centered solutions (as illustrated by Steven Johnson's theory on "emergence"), which naturally considers the actions of individuals more than traditional top down strategies. This is particularly relevant to the co-creator relationships that are becoming central to how people use the Internet and, thus, are becoming central to the practice of interactive design. The culture of blogging and wiki creation exemplifies this notion of user-as-creator. In this participation-age scenario, knowledge can be freely shared, altered and remixed online and the technology has encouraged a new paradigm of online participation. The Internet not only facilitates interactive behaviors, but also mediates the transfer of information, and in the process creates meaning in itself.

Without a doubt, knowledge is being traded and shared like never before. This giving and receiving of knowledge is a central tenant of the Open Source movement, which focuses on building a free exchange and the idea that by working collaboratively things can be made better. Free of commerce, online communities and applications – such as wikis, blogs and web spaces built around sharing and social book marking – exemplify the new "gift economy." On the surface the purpose of these applications is to document and categorize online information, but beyond that intent, the applications form linked networks of people through a system of subjective tagging, collaboration and ultimately shared values.

This new paradigm is made possible by the Internet's technological affordances, which are the infrastructure of bloggers and other webizens. Advancing technology amplifies the speed and ease with which digital files are simultaneously replicated, manipulated and disseminated and therefore diminishes the time it takes for ideas and information to circle the globe; feeling nearly instantaneous. As author Dan Friedman proclaimed in his book, *The World is Flat*, the world appears to be forever shrinking. The Internet is a borderless space where physical geography is no longer considered. Bloggers broadcast from all over the world and offer a point of contact for anyone with access. Our relationship with information is removed from the idea of the local. Communities, no longer restrained by proximity, are free to emerge by common interest alone.

All of the aforementioned make up a unique phenomenon within the context of digital media, globalization and design. People connect with one another through online communities and manage to cross global-borders like never before. The power of media creation and consumption is being taken from the hand of international conglomerations and organizations of authority and has been given to the people. Thus, it is at this intersection between digital media and globalization where we have found designs' most significant purpose – to facilitate and support the individual's ability to participate in a global free culture. Just click to enter.

ONE SMALL STEP FOR BLOG, ONE GIANT LEAP FOR BLOGKIND

In the article, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson states that historically, "knowledge lived by reproducibility and dissemination." (Anderson 37) When considered in the context of today's thriving blog phenomenon, it becomes apparent that the path of knowledge is expanding on an exponentially accelerated scale. The web is filled with unimaginable amounts of information, and blogs are the filters that replicate and disseminate

it directly to its shared community. Bloggers are the brave souls parsing through this influx of information and documenting that which they deem useful, relevant and unique from their own local perspective. Some blogs perform as editorials and news portals, whereas others are simply digital manifestations of the personal journal.

Reincarnate of what happened when printed knowledge became ubiquitous; readers created scrapbooks in which they cut & past images and quotes from the fleeting printed ephemera of the day. Today's ephemera is digital, yet it still must be gathered and documented in digital collections. Peoples' collective digital behaviors and how they interact with technology (e.g. cut & paste, image remixing, information condensation, file upload and download) affect the construction of their own identity as they choose what to share and what to consume with others in their community.

Blogs are vastly changing our global consciousness. The multitude of voices disseminating information carries an unprecedented number of perspectives that effect our information consumption. This mechanism is vastly changing how we view information about the world, in both conscious and subconscious ways. The "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" occurs as much online as it did with printed language. (Anderson 39) However, just as the literate achieved power with the advent of the press, the power balance also shifts on the web away from traditional capitalistic means into individual voices with communal impact. The nature of this new media outlet embodies the essence of language diversity (e.g. compare professional blogs like Kottke.org to the teen rants on Livejournal.com).

The Open Source movement is a vital element of this new Internet era. Initially the definition referred to the individuals' open or free access to computer source code. But the term Open Source has come to mean much more. Wikipedians define it as "a philosophy or a pragmatic methodology" where value is placed upon the non-commercial exchange of information. The model purports the ideals of share-and-share-alike without hierarchical ownership of ideas or products. Since technology offers an easy exchange of information, a variety of online communities adapt Open Source (and creative commons) values for various expanded purposes.

Writer David Reinfurt, in his article in *Citizen Designer*, looks to the Open Source movement as a model methodology for making changes within the collaboratively based design profession. With this, I wholeheartedly agree, as the value of collectively contributing and working towards a common good could prove invaluable to the user-centered design process. The values of Open Source – as opposed to the insular model of privatization and protected intellectual property – make sense for design within a global context. Bruce Sterling's *Viridian* website suggests that we engage in "a noncommercial Linux model for graphic designers, where important graphic challenges are tossed onto the Internet and tackled in tandem." (viridiandesign.org) This makes sense for designers who aim to support the co-creator model of interactive design.

Design critic Max Bruinsma notes that users "engage in the themes and causes of their choice as actors, not as mere consumers. Collectively, they contribute to an ever expanding mosaic." I believe that relinquishing the term of "consumer" is an important marker in the transition from top-down-designing-for-users to a more bottom-up D-I-Y approach. In the contemporary mediated world the participant is the maker, and vice versa. One only needs to look to the explosion of peer2peer file sharing as the figurehead of gift economy value systems.

Former Wired editor Kevin Kelly ponders, “if everyone is busy making, altering, mixing, and mashing, who will have time to sit back and veg out? Who will be a consumer?” His answer “No one. And that’s just fine.” (Kelly) In this scenario the consumer is the producer (what author Alvin Toffler coined “prosumer” many years ago) and engages in full-participation and collaboration with the medium.

As a prime example, techno-centric blogger Julian Dibbell explains that the Internet allows him to enjoy his digital music collection in an entirely different way than is achievable in an analog music collection. For him, the thrill is watching others download his music. It is the interconnectivity of the web itself that allows him to open up his collection to other audiophiles. In return for his music, he has access to their collections in a fair exchange between music lovers. A social network is linked from song to song, connecting collector to collector.

Another community that is unique to this new model is Wikipedia.org. Wikis are peer-governed, self-generating and editing communities. This browser-based application allows users to add and edit content through a broad-collaborative effort. Almost always appearing on page one of a Google search result, Wikipedia is a good source for folksonomic and technological definitions that are slow to be defined elsewhere. This lies in stark contrast to the single authoritarian or antiquated source that isn’t able to adapt at the speed users expect. Wikipedia is created by people who make it their hobby to write for, update and maintain content. In my opinion, Wikipedia is a virtual library and a prime visualization of Open Source values.

Designer Neville Brody suggests that designers can break rules as a way to spark change. (Brody) Perhaps then, altering the way users participate with traditional interactivity can combat the capitalistic complacency and e-commercicopia found on the web. Since digital collections have virtually no limitation to size and offer instantaneous acquisition, they can become an alternative to traditional excessive materiality. Dibbell articulates that the Internet is “changing the erotics of our relationship to stuff.” (Dibbell) A virtual object can live in multiple collections in unlimited contexts and file sharing allows joint ownership of a single object. The user’s understanding of gathering content has shifted, which is apparent in the Napster and BitTorrent models of file sharing. The rise of peer2peer networks, social networking communities and the expanding blogosphere is proof that the Internet encourages full-participation and offers users a local portal into the global infrastructure.

IS NEW MEDIA REALLY NEW OR JUST MEDIA?

It must be noted that the transformation of our relationships to information by technology is not entirely new and it is important to understand similar paradigm shifts in history so we can properly embrace and evolve from this current situation. There are historical parallels to be made between the contemporary information/digital revolution, and that which occurred with the spread of print in the 16th century, and then three centuries later with the innovations of the Victorian era. Specifically, the emergence of language classification, the inventions of the telegraph and railroad, and even the popular embracement of scrapbooking inform and support our contemporary situation.

This is not the first time we have experienced an explosion of mass replicated and disseminated information. With the advent of the printing press readers were connected through printed language in the same way the Internet revolutionized our connections all over again. Anderson writes, "print has changed the appearance and state of the world." (Anderson 37) It can be similarly argued that the appearance and state of the world will never look like it did before the emergence of the Internet and is undoubtedly forever changed. Admittedly, technology is limited to those with computer equipment and Internet connection. But for those who do have access, modern technology provides the ultimate means to generate and gather information. In a way, the means is born from the need.

However, author Robert Putnam warns that thanks to technology the American population "is increasingly isolated... and less willing to unite in communities or as a nation." I argue that the loss of the concept of "nation" may mean identity is no longer a construction of a false or assumed community. (Reed Business Information, Inc.) Perhaps this community is no longer imagined, but is in fact a community made of connections of substance and not geography. Forming collections of shared perspectives across the World Wide Web, speaking not only through text, but also through images, video, and sound. Or perhaps this is just another "imagined community" based on tags and links, arguably still a false signifier of a person's identity.

The question arises as to what is legitimate? The Victorian era observed the rise of yellow journalism, which ignored or often fabricated the truth. In the same respect, blogs have no official check and balance, so how is a reader to know legitimacy? A lot of faith must be put into the Open Source model of self-regulating and governing communities. Thus, the trust that occurs between readers and writers of blogs is based on individually set criteria, and not so much on traditional definitions of authority. Online authority comes from its built in immediacy (or who-posts-first) and social relevancy to an individual reader. The production of content is democratic and relayed by word-of-link.

Hyperlinks can signify legitimacy and safeguard against obscurity by acting as citations in which the audience can verify the credibility of information. In the same respect, tagging applications bolster the relevance of urls within the local community of fellow taggers. Pragmatically, subjective tagging allows the user to categorize digital content, but ultimately tagging has changed the Internet from a search engine to a categorical tool and digital archive.

Perhaps (for better or worse) a hierarchy is being established in the blogosphere as professional bloggers gain notoriety and the quality of information is determined by the quantity of links and thus the legitimacy of search engine ranking. The renowned info-centric and content pioneering blog Kottke.org is setting the pace for how a more professional blog might behave. Jason Kottke is the first self-proclaimed professional blogger, who quit his day job in order to blog full time. A loyal fan base keeps him employed through a silent fund raising campaign in which he solicits donations from his readers. Kottke was even recruited to be the official blog reporter of the AIGA national convention in Boston and has appeared on panel discussions on the role of blogs in society.

T IS FOR...

In contrast to non-authoritarian online sources, Stewart Ewen describes the development of the Roget's thesaurus in the 1840s as a complex topical classification of words in their "proper place, within the universe of possible ideas and meanings." (Ewen 11) A comparison can be made between the classification of the thesaurus and the democratic editing on a wiki, or the communal tagging on flickr. Whereas Roget offered a singular and stereotypical viewpoint – an unfortunate culturally biased product of the times – Wikipedia is based on a collaborative, self-edited model. Both content sources are subjective but in completely different ways. I believe Roget's innovative idea-based classification system was a precursor to the contemporary online trend towards subjective, community determined tagging & social bookmarking. The thesaurus lives in the middle between the completely arbitrary (i.e. alphabetical) organization of the dictionary and what ideas or urls an online local deems most significant.

According to Tom Standage, author of *The Victorian Internet*, further historical analysis reveals that during the Victorian period the telegraph was shrinking the world in much the same way we experience today. The telegraph lines that appeared suddenly across the U.S. allowed business to be transmitted through the wires instantaneously and were a technological marvel. For better or for worse, the world has been undergoing a shrinking process for centuries, from Marco Polo to the cross-continental railroad to the information super-highway of fiber optic cables buried in the ground. In the global sense, as long as shipping routes exist, we are not dependent upon geographical boundaries.

Just as the telegraph "inundated users with a deluge of information," so did the popular influx of printed newspapers and in response, many Victorian era people kept scrapbooks as records; cutting & pasting important events, quotes, and dates from the newspaper. Scrapbooking at its heart is about "recontextualizing, remixing, recompositing" information; quenching the need to record ephemeral information before it is thrown out. (Helfand) Writer Ellen Garvey states in her article on 19th century scrapbooking, "readers adapted to the proliferation of print by cutting it up and saving it, reorganizing it, [and] sometimes recirculating it." (Garvey 209) Thus, we can see how the scrapbooking (of yesteryear and today) offers a metaphor for the blogging phenomena. Bloggers are fulfilling the same need to collect and document all of the immense information that exists online by saving links and cutting & pasting relevant content. Traditional Victorian scrapbooking and contemporary blogging both engage in the act of highlighting communal relevancy. These actions reflect similar fervor for recording history and decontextualizing information.

The importance of the blog in the role of collecting and cataloging the information on the Internet is similar to the transition of printed languages centuries earlier. The advent of the printing press made it so texts were "no longer subject to individualizing and unconsciously modernizing habits of monastic scribes." (Anderson 44) But cyclically, today's bloggers return to the traditions of those scribes, cutting & pasting, and editing by self-determined filters. An individual's mode of authorship is defined by the technology at hand. The single scrapbook or blog author determines the importance of a clipping to save for a later date. The scrapbook creator or blogger is simultaneously performing as editor, producer and consumer of the content.

Scrapbooks occupy a dual space, as they are intended for personal use, but upon public recirculation, they offer significant (if unintended) historical and cultural insight for the historian. Likewise, the Internet facilitates both private and public purposes. In his blog, Dibbell concludes that file-sharing communities realize Walter Benjamin's desire for an "intimate knowledge of the collector and the shared knowledge of the collective to occupy one and the same social space." (Dibbell) Blogs act as personal writing venues, yet more importantly, they keep information traveling online. I believe the blurred dichotomy of public and private is yet to have its full effect upon the digisphere.

Due to economic reasons, some scrapbook creators would paste newspaper clippings into unused books. Design critic Jessica Helfand recounts an example of obituary clippings pasted inside an old math book. This aspect of economy, and of value judgments as to which content is worth saving, is echoed throughout history. Before paper was affordable, monk scribes would fill medieval books to the brim with "annotating and typographic layering." (Helfand) Inversely, the Internet embodies gift economy values; so economic factors do not have the same relevance. Anyone with access to the Internet can have a blog for free (even a homeless man had a blog at thehomelessguy.blogspot.com).

The remixing of content is not the only Open Source value shared by scrapbooks and blog spaces. Garvey surmises that the "same recycled source codes underlie thousands of websites, just like scrapbooks borrowed formal qualities from one another and from the volumes that structured them." (Garvey 212) Helfand reiterates Garvey's claims by stating that scrapbooking was the "original open source technology" because it is a collaborative, customized "visual expression of sampling, culture mixing." (Helfand, Scrapbooking)

I BLOG THEREFORE I AM

In his book, Anderson argued that there are three distinct ways in which "print languages laid the bases for national consciousness." (Anderson 44) With similar reasoning, blogs have begun to equally affect our global consciousness. First, the printed languages offered an immediate exchange of national communication and performed as collections of shared perspectives. Thus, we can see that the individual voices springing forth on the Internet are doing the same for our global consciousness; speaking not only through text, but also through images, video, and sound. Now bloggers can "gradually become aware of hundreds of thousands of people in their particular language." (Anderson 44) Anderson points out that in the 1500s, "separate printing presses were working overtime" to keep up with the new supply and demand for the gospel. (Anderson 44) Today we see a similar rush to embrace the overflow of information and connectivity found online, with over 100 million blogs established worldwide (statistic from blogcount.com).

Second, while print originally thrived from its "fixity," blogs are forcing us to reexamine the contemporary value of permanence and its role in the validation of information. Blogs (while not physically locatable) thrive on a steadfastness of dissemination, as content is linked, quoted and remixed. While links can be broken, messages cannot be easily removed once uploaded (just ask the "Star Wars kid"), and the web can never be turned off. Even as fluid as it seems, it turns out that the web is no less "fixed."

Finally, just as “print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars,” we can now see how a new language-of-power has emerged. (Anderson 45) Blogs have shown traditional news media that new channels of information are desired and embraced. They are altering the very nature of the user relationship with authenticity and authority. Power may be diluted amongst the millions of netizens, but the message is more directed and customized for individual voices.

When the telegraph arrived it required people to readjust their behaviors towards communicating and collecting information. (Standage viii) Also, at that moment, we saw the rise of investigative journalism as people sought the truth from behind the veils of authority. Today we are just as likely to readjust our behaviors surrounding information and the need to seek out the truth is just as relevant. People have changed how they understand and consume media and, like many people, I have become distrusting of traditional media outlets. I count myself part of a new generation that primarily receives news through the immediate and highly specialized medium of the Internet filter. The politicized relationship that traditional broadcast media has had with the truth has reached a point of disingenuousness that people are starting to react to. Especially given the alternatives that the Internet can provide.

GLOBAL SUBCULTURE? OMG ROFL BRB

As people fervently embrace new technologies, it is not surprising to witness the arrival of a “subculture with its own customs and vocabulary.” (Standage viii) This new subculture is characterized by its own immediacy (acronyms and short hand), and its voyeurism and casual atmosphere that pervade cyberspace. The Internet voice is a casual dialect that is reminiscent of a verbal or conversational tone and readers relate to that informality. It is this personal, yet often anonymous, non-authorial voice that has become the vernacular of the web. In an effort to maintain its place in culture, traditional news media outlets (like local affiliate news stations) are even desperately reaching for some of this new subculture power by producing their own blogs and hiring guerilla bloggers for strategic or cosmetic purposes.

The technological means is a natural incubator for emergent sub-communities. These locals are born from the technological affordances that inform their behaviors, which in turn impact the communities they inhabit. The web-based applications, del.icio.us and flickr, have sparked the tagging phenomenon, which in turn has led to innumerable reuses by a variety of subcultures. This form of information categorization is generated through user-determined key word association and acts as a system of social bookmarking. This non-hierarchical public categorization tool lists, houses and hyperlinks shared popular urls and tags collected by users. Thus, the values of these Open Source communities are revealed by hierarchically ranking the number of collectors who bookmarked the same item. By sharing and visualizing the community’s collective tags, patterns of use emerge and popular files become easily identified.

In an online article, Weeldon talks about “merging cultural perceptions of information with the economies of distributing and consuming that information.” (Van Weelden) Similarly when economic barriers are removed from an existing behavior the potential for great shifts in the role of traditional media begin to emerge. The prime example of this is flickr.com. Flickr leverages an existing behavior – the photo album and the process

of sharing photos with family and friends – and merges it with technological capabilities. Private photos easily cross into the public, and a person's subjectively created tags unite a growing social network. Ultimately, the community elevates the technology beyond its original intent (of housing, sharing and tagging photos) and playful, idiosyncratic behaviors emerge. For example, photosets are topical based clusters of photos that participants create and contribute toward. These sets range from the highly structured bird-group, which maintains strict rules about uploading and tagging photos, to the more inventive infinity-group, which is based upon a constantly evolving chain reaction of self-portraiture. The infinity photoset is an experience only made possible by technology. It is the affordance of the Internet that realizes this kind of creative potential.

In these online communities the user is co-creator and collaborator. New tools and clones are constantly being developed (under the gift economy model) that adapt and re-visualize the data. The subjective and customizable organization, determined by the individual (and more importantly by community values) affects the entire system. Peer2peer networks allow collectors to “open their personal computers to live, incoming connections from anywhere on the Internet.” (Dibbell) By simply entering another collection through a single file, in essence, the Internet not only facilitates a global collection, but also connects people locally. The shared space of the Internet forms personal or cultural based collecting narratives that can support the kind of co-creator relationships identified in blogs and tagging applications.

As illustrated in the article, Imagined Communities, the printing press destroyed the local vernacular and in its place appeared a loyalty to the nation. Yet, on the other end of the pendulum, the categorization and development of unique digital vernaculars has begun to splinter the national identity. As people indulge and identify with emerging “locals,” unified global anachronisms feel inauthentic and contrived. Digital vernaculars like acronymic language and meme “in-jokes,” despite their global reach, are kept vital by their local expediency and the guise of familiarity. The texting culture of instant messaging has given rise to its own language-based identity that subverts its original global affordance. It is the development and implementation of these unique languages (whether it be defined by syntax, memes, tags or photosets) that constructs the identity of the local community.

As a society we react to new technologies by innovatively discovering purposes for the technology. The traditional concept of collecting has been altered to become a true social link “connecting the collector not just to objects but...to other people.” (Dibbell) Each object becomes a portal into another's collection, forming a thread of shared values, common interest, or simply tagging similarities. As the means of information sharing, technology impacts the local and facilitates an alternative way of understanding the categorization of the local. Communication behavior is mediated and offers both limitations and new opportunities. These social networks are cultural signifiers, presenting the values of the particular local that generates and enthusiastically employs particular tags.

Author Robert Putnam offers a caveat to Dibbell's embrace. He states that due to technology, “Americans became more disconnected from their families, neighbors, communities, and the republic itself.” (Miller) I'm more inclined to agree with Dibbell's view and see the disconnect from the “republic itself” as a good thing since the idealism of nationhood is a fabrication in the first place. In essence, local digital communities that develop are based on self-proclaimed connections and not false geographic boundaries or over generalized global values.

The book, *The Cultural Creatives*, offers a positive viewpoint on the way technology is affecting community, and therefore identity. It claims there is an expanding group of like-minded people who value volunteerism, technological advance, and quality of life and family. This group, which composes 26% of the U.S. population, is not materialistic and lacks trust in hierarchical institutions. (Korten 320) All of these traits are evidence of how people are affected by technology and are choosing to embrace Open Source values.

Whether one examines the technological impact of the printing press of the 16th Century, the scrapbooks of the 19th Century or a 21st Century blog, one thing remains clear; our local and global identities are highly informed by burgeoning technology and the resulted impact it has on our relationships with information, authority, and community. For the prosumer – whether blogger, tagger or scrapbooker – the process of using the media itself informs ones' own identity. The participant is the maker of their own online experience, author of their own identity, in a way that is historically precedent and yet never before experienced in exactly this way. Immateriality, public and private gradient relationships and Open Source values all have impact upon our online (and possibly offline) interactions and foster an emergent-based behavior that is both digitally adaptive and innovative. The Internet was created and nurtured by social responsibility, and it is a role of contemporary designers to become facilitators, mediators and ambassadors that empower the local to design their own path within the global consciousness.

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