

## Commonspace - Chapter Five (The Infinite unBirthday Party)

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*These business models presume generosity - or at least some basic drive to share. Why not? Some anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists argue that humans are hardwired for generosity, that our propensity for sharing was inherited from our primitive ancestors. The economist Mancur Olson came to the same conclusion in his consideration of the rich man who provides a coastal community with a lighthouse: Even though it isn't in the interest of an individual to pay for a public work, the benefactor is indirectly compensated through a boost in status.*

Mark Frauenfelder, *Wired* 8.07

Online, the only way to win is to give away as much power as you can. As fast as you can.

More specifically, you need to give power to your users, your community and your partners. You need to help them reach their goals. Help them make money. Help them find each other. You need to empower these people, and, in doing so, empower collective action. In turn, you'll get the kind of respect, support and (yes) revenue you need to make it on the Internet.

For traditional organizations and businesses, this is the most confusing and scary rule of commonspace. Business, politics and even community building is about consolidating power, controlling what happens, and being in charge - isn't it?

Not any more.

We all have the drive to be creative, to contribute and to succeed. As we leave our roles as drones behind, we realize that we can have all of these things *and* make a living. Having a job, participating in a community and reaching your goals isn't about conformity anymore. And for more and more of us, it's possible to pursue our passions as more than a sideline.

In many respects, the network makes this possible. It gives us the tools that make it cheaper to do what we want to do. It makes smaller, more focussed markets and communities possible. Most importantly, it gives us each other. In a flat, accessible networked world, you don't have to fill out a form or worm your way up through the bureaucracy to start selling your online game or networking with solar energy enthusiasts. You just do it.

Not to say that it's easy. We all need the right tools to make the network dance. Helping each other to grow while simultaneously nurturing the collective requires the right context and a solid platform. This is where the 'give power to get power' rule comes in.

We talked briefly about the gift economy in Chapter 2 and pointed out that the most innovative parts of Net culture operate at least in part as gift economies. And we explained that even though gift economies and restricted economies are opposites in many respects, they always co-exist. The atmosphere of a gift economy in full gear is chaotic, noisy, and exuberant. A good analogy is the Mad Hatter's unBirthday Party in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. People think they're animals, animals think they're people. (If you don't see what this has to do with the Internet, do a search on 'Anthromorphics' sometime.) Everyone talks and sings at once, often in bizarre argots of their own devising. Blow out the candle and make a wish... but don't forget: if it's your party, *you* give out the gifts. Welcome to the Infinite unBirthday Party.

Eric Raymond contends in 'Homesteading the Noosphere' (the sequel to 'The Cathedral and the Bazaar' at [www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/homesteading/](http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/homesteading/)) that 'it is quite clear that the society of open-source hackers is in fact a gift culture. Within it, there is no serious shortage of the "survival necessities" - disk space, network bandwidth, computing power. Software is freely shared. This abundance creates a situation in which the only available measure of competitive success is reputation among one's peers.<sup>[1]</sup> But elements of gift cultures exist in other parts of the Internet as well: file-sharing networks and opinion sites are relatively pure gift cultures. Many online communities and some types of gaming networks also exhibit these characteristics.

## The Failure of Greed

In a recent editorial on The Silicon Alley Daily <[www.siliconalleydaily.com](http://www.siliconalleydaily.com)>, Jason McCabe Calacanis writes the following: '[L]et's first look at the two lessons we've learned in the five years.... [W]e've learned that consumers want content for free, and that subscriptions don't work. Second, we've learned that banner ads are a miserable failure. Consumers have blocked them out, and more importantly, banner ads alone can't cover the costs of producing content.' [2] What Calacanis is saying is that many Internet businesses have never made any money in the way that they expected to (i.e. through metered content) and may *never* make any money at all. A new study from the Harvard Business School suggests that 58% of the 'Internet incubators' which fund other Internet startups *are startups themselves*, with the same cashflow problems, the same sketchy life-expectancy, and precious little success to show for their efforts [3].

It's almost funny. The blind are leading the blind. Maybe it's time to roundfile the whole greedy capitalist schtick and take another tack.

The entrenchment of gift economy ethics online may well explain why it's been so difficult to port restricted economy practices onto the Internet successfully. Many of the most astounding Internet successes have been the result of creating tools and environments that empower others. Sometimes success has been the result of creating a platform that allows the magic sparks of community to fly (The Well). Other times it's the effect of creating basic tools that allow collective interactions to spread like wildfire (Netscape). Success has also been about giving away what's rightfully yours so that it'll come back as something better (Linux). Whatever the case, those who have empowered others as much as themselves have thrived on the Internet.

This seeming selflessness can come from many different sources:

- Hackers and programmers who are driven more by vision than by profit;
- Companies that are trying to empower their users and customers;
- Managers who realize they'll increase quality if their employees are pursuing their passions;
- Activists who are trying to change the world.

The common thread among these disparate groups is their understanding of the need to invigorate, excite, hook, create benefit for and empower others to succeed in the commonspace world. And, as we have suggested, this approach works a hell of a lot better than 'business as usual'.

## The Last of the Control Freaks

Rule #1: Never run your online service or community like a control freak. We learned this rule the hard way.

In 1994, one of us (Mark) was part of a team of people who were running Web Networks <[www.web.ca](http://www.web.ca)>, a small but successful online community in Canada. Starting in 1988, it offered international e-mail and discussion groups for environmentalists, peace activists and others with burning causes to champion. In its first six years, Web built an astoundingly loyal following. Web members did everything community members are supposed to do: they fostered relationships, built libraries of documents, engaged in passionate debates, and started new mini-communities. Most importantly, the users kept the community lively and covered costs by paying a monthly fee. Unlike most Internet companies today, Web almost always broke even.

And then, around 1995, the Internet exploded as a commercial phenomenon. Suddenly, our loyal users were presented with a whole new set of products and opportunities. Out in the open market, they could get cheaper e-mail and connectivity. With the advent of Netscape and the availability of cheap, fast modems, the World Wide Web began to grow at such a phenomenal rate that many people thought that the WWW was all there was to the Internet. Web Networks users started to see the advantage of having their own WWW sites, whether they were hosted by us or other providers. This was a real revolution, because our members produced a *lot* of documents. They'd seen our online community as a great distribution channel for their documents, but now they had the WWW, which was even better.

This is where we screwed up. Big-time. We were so full of ourselves, and so full of the success of our online community, that we ignored the 'give power to get power' rule that had worked to our benefit for so many years. We tied our pricing and services to our online community. To post information, you had to be a member. To read information, you had to be a member. We were the gatekeepers. 'Join our text-based service and see the best activist information! Avoid the noise of the Web and Usenet!' That was our message. Clearly, people would see the advantage of making us the gatekeepers. *And* the advantage of paying us to post and read each others content. Right?

Nope. Not on your life.

Our once-loyal users saw these misguided efforts to bolster community as damage, and routed around us. The postings that once made our community so valuable quickly scattered across this Web page and that. Understandably, our users were more interested in creating an information resource that they controlled than they were in paying money to be a part of a generic information pool run by someone else. They wanted independence, power and control over their own information. We didn't give it to them. And we lost.

But we weren't the only ones. Compuserve, Prodigy, The Source, Delphi, even AOL - all of the early big daddies of online community - made the same mistake. All of the early online services spent the mid-1990s thinking that their gated communities were more valuable than the World Wide Web. They thought they could win by mediating the user experience rather than cracking it wide open. They were wrong. With the exception of AOL, which rescued itself by offering cheap, unlimited Internet access just in time, all of these online pioneers are either dead or buried in someone else's company.

### **Power That Shares: Action Applications**

Luckily for Web Networks, 'the give power to get power' lesson was one that we learned quickly. We saw why users were leaving and starting looking for a solution. But we also saw that there was a real market niche for a content aggregator focused on non-profit organizations in Canada. We had learned by this time that the only way to grab this niche was to empower users - to put them in charge.

What Internet users want most is freedom and control over their own content. For all but hard-core geeks, this usually translates into the ability to easily update their own Web pages. The non-techno-savvy community organizers using Web Networks wanted to be able to press a button to put their information online without hiring an expensive teenage nerd to help them. This seemed reasonable enough, so we started thinking in that direction.

A few programmers and content people at Web Networks began the process by building little databases called 'Action Applications'. These tools were designed to manage the kinds of information that many organizations post to Web sites: events listings, press releases, lists of links, and descriptions of resources. The Action Applications were simple tools that were easy to customize and replicate. Add a few extra HTML tags and graphics references and voila: a user had a new events calendar for their web site.

While this was no big deal to us, it was a big deal to our customers. They ate the Action Applications up, because these tools helped them move a step closer to controlling their own communications destiny.

More interestingly, these tools also helped us launch the concept of constellations and to feed commonspace. Every time we gave an Action Application events calendar to one organization, we made it possible for that calendar to share content with the dozens of other organizations using the same software. In the non-profit arena, where resources are scarce and shared campaign work is a way of life, this technology was a tremendous boon. Like-minded groups could leverage each other's content, build collective newsletters, and share the load of developing communications campaigns. Among organizations where this worked well (and where it hopefully will spread to other groups), organizational boundaries began to leak, and constellations of content began to emerge.

The best part was that Web Networks got to give away its cake and eat it too. Creating these tools made users happy, because it empowered them. But they also kept Web Networks alive as a content aggregator. Web was able to take the best of the material from its user databases and promote that material on its 'community.web.ca' site, which in turn drew more traffic to the users' sites. It was a win-win-win-win-win situation.

While the Action Application idea is still in its infancy (it's been up and running in various iterations since early-1999), the idea seems to be catching on. The constellation idea combines the best qualities from Web publishing and the best ideas from USENET, connecting the strong voices of individual users to a networked community of ideas. With the hope of expanding the use of these tools, Web Networks has handed off Action Application development to the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) -- a consortium of 25 non-profit Internet solutions providers from around the world. The APC is rewriting the Action Applications software and will release it as open source. Once that happens, who knows how large the constellations will become?

## **The Group Mind: Slashdot**

The convergence between online community (which has always been associated with many-to-many, omni-directional discussion) and the Web (which is usually associated with one-way document delivery) is a fascinating one to watch. In many cases, the two styles blend like oil and water. Many organizations think they can simply graft the appearance of many-to-many discussion onto their service while still retaining the advantages of one-way selling. But it doesn't work. What does work is to give people real power over your Web site, to merge the conversation and the document so they become one.

And nobody does this better than Slashdot <[www.slashdot.org](http://www.slashdot.org)>.

Focusing on open source and tech news (their masthead reads 'News for Nerds. Stuff that Matters'), Slashdot is a conversational-living-document-group-mind. There is a thrilling blur between documents and discussions, writers and readers. The writing on Slashdot is a form of collective authorship as unique to the Internet as the concept of open source software itself.

Here's how it works. Anyone can submit a story to Slashdot using its Submissions Bin. There are hundreds of submissions per day. Anonymous submissions by non-registered users stand the same chance of being published as those of members; but as the site's FAQ states, 'We do, however, reserve the right to refer to you as an Anonymous Coward, and mock you mercilessly.' Submissions are sorted and judged by four to six of the site's core authors, and those deemed of interest to the community appear on the front page.

What's of interest to the community? Rob Malda, (a.k.a. CmdrTaco) the site's administrator, describes it as an 'omelette':

Over the years, we've figured out what ingredients are best on Slashdot. The ultimate goal is, of course, to create an omelette that I enjoy eating: by 8pm, I want to see a dozen interesting stories on Slashdot. I hope you enjoy them too. I believe that we've grown in size because we share a lot of common interests with our readers. But that doesn't mean that I'm gonna mix an omelette with all sausages, or someday throw away the tomatoes because the green peppers are really fresh.

There are many components to the Slashdot Omelette. Stories about Linux. Tech stories. Science. Legos. Book Reviews. Yes, even Jon Katz. By mixing and matching these things each and every day, we bring you what I call Slashdot. On some days it definitely is better than others, but overall we think it's a tasty little treat and we hope you enjoy eating as much as we enjoy cooking it. [\[4\]](#)

Once a story has been posted as part of the Slashdot omelette, it's open to comment from the site's users. Thousands of comments are posted a day, tens of thousands each month. At any given time, the site's database holds over 40,000 of them. Meanwhile, Slashdot offers the users a wide variety of options for viewing these comments, so that each person can decide exactly how involved they want to become in any given discussion.

Why does this system work so well? And how did it become one of the most read and respected news sources in the hacker world? By giving power to the users.

On SlashDot, the users run the site, creating almost all the content. Slashdot exists by giving power and a platform away to people with nothing more than an urge to say something. Fortunately, many of these people are stratospherically smart, and even most of the ones that aren't have

internalized some sort of community standard for what constitutes a good post. And of course, not all postings get approved; there is a sophisticated filtering process that determines what appears on the site. By giving people a high-profile place to articulate their interests and concerns, SlashDot gives its users a kind of power they don't have on their own Web site. This kind of empowerment builds loyalty and trust.

Looked at cynically, empowering your users also builds a brand. That's why VA Linux bought Andover.net at a cost of almost \$900 million in cash and stock. Andover owns Slashdot and Freshmeat.net (a Web newsletter that tracks the latest releases of open source software), among other things. Supporting sites like Slashdot and Freshmeat brings VA Linux closer to its the users. At least that's the theory.

Hotwired.com ran a column in February 2000 titled 'Et Tu, Slashdot?' <[hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/00/06/index2a.html](http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/00/06/index2a.html)>

suggesting that this purchase will inevitably prejudice Slashdot's commentary in favour of VA Linux over other Linux distributions, and thereby cause a loss of credibility in the open source community. However, the snipe that the author took at Jon Katz in the same article suggests that it has more to do with *Wired*/Hotwired staff's insecurities about their own decaying reputation than with any real threat to Slashdot's integrity. (Katz is the author of *Geeks*, *Media Rants* and other important books about the Internet explosion, and a former writer for the original - read 'relevant and interesting' - *Wired* before its purchase by the Condé Nast news empire.)

In any event, there really isn't much else like Slashdot in cyberspace today. But there could be.

### **The Big Friend of the Little Guy**

The most impressive feature of the 'give power' rule is that it applies in even the most crass of online arenas: retail. (Okay, maybe porn and gambling sites are more crass. Maybe.) The phenomenal rise of eBay and online auctions in general have built solid businesses by empowering the 'little guy' to become a retailer. This may seem trivial, but it is a significant shift in the balance of power.

Think about traditional retail. From Sears Roebuck to Barnes and Noble to Home Depot to Starbucks, BIG has always been the name of the game. Get BIG and sell mountains of stuff. How do you do this? Have a good selection of products. Set up outlets in as many places as you can. Control the supply chain as tightly as possible (including establishing private brands). In other words, spend as much money as you can to control as much of the turf as you can.

The eBay business model takes most of these principles and flips them upside-down. eBay is about giving away turf, giving other people a place to sell and letting go of the supply chain.

This inversion of retail power relationships applies not only to the sellers, but also to the buyers. The eBay discussion forums and approval rating system allow buyers to tell each other what they think about a particular vendor. Whether they have something good or bad to say about a vendor, eBay gives buyers a space to share their opinion and gives other buyers transparent and immediate access to this information. This would be akin to Sears, or at least the mall that houses Sears, providing consumers with a place to rant and rave about what a crappy (or great) place Sears is to shop. This kind of openness is unheard of in the offline world and is even uncommon in big-time online retailing. But it is standard fare on eBay.

The only part of eBay that reflects the rules of traditional retailing is its product selection, and even here there's no real grounds for comparison with a bricks-and-mortar store. eBay has ratcheted up the selection quotient beyond belief. People can buy anything from coins to motorcycle gas tanks to Swiss watches to shoes to online role-playing-game characters to computer RAM. You can get anything. (Well, *almost* anything, though people have posted hoaxes on eBay advertising sales of everything from cocaine to human organs to their own virginity.)

In a way, providing small-time vendors and buyers with a platform makes eBay an empowerment company. It makes its money by helping others succeed financially. It keeps its credibility by listening to buyers and shutting down abusive vendors. The result is a business that is low in overhead and potentially very high in profit. With the advent of software such as PayPal <[www.x.com](http://www.x.com)>, the #1 payment service on eBay and fast becoming a Web standard for e-commerce, online transactions are becoming more transparent, more closely linked to everyday life, and less inconvenient, which is the ultimate goal.

eBay's largesse with its power has created a brand – maybe even a community – that people love enough to transfer from their computers into the real world. 'eBay Anywhere' is a system of pagers, Internet-enabled Personal Data Managers (PalmPilots, etc.) and WAP-enabled cell phones that ensures that the most fanatical eBay users never have to worry about being outbid because they didn't have constant access to their transactions.

It will be interesting to see how the eBay 'empowerment model' and other systems that allow the 'small guy' to successfully sell online will fare over time. Certainly, there is a lot of money in big Business-to-Consumer (B-to-C) operations like Amazon. But is there enough to make them consistently turn a profit? Such operations combine many of the advantages of traditional retail (quality, selection, reliability, predictability) with some of the advantages of the Internet and commonspace (user input, aggregated preferences, timelines). But they also have disadvantages. Internet retail is expensive to operate and requires huge turnover; inventory management is difficult; brand-name recognition is lower than it is with established bricks-and-mortar companies, and when the venture capital runs out, Internet stores actually have to turn a profit (a harsh fact of life with which many e-tailers just can't cope with).

In order to handle the just-in-time process of ordering items from suppliers and then re-shipping them, big B-to-C operations require stock and complex inventory management systems. And therein lies the secret that Amazon and other companies hope that the average net user never realizes: on the Internet, Big B-to-C is an unnecessary middleman. There's no reason to shop at a Big B-to-C site for something that the manufacturer's Web site can provide more cheaply and more rapidly. The only purpose of Big B-to-C's is to be a one-stop shopping source. Because comparison shopping engines are becoming more available and more powerful, finding the Web sites for the manufacturers of even the most obscure products is becoming much less difficult.

Big B-to-C strategies may be successful in the short term, but they're just marking time. The values of Amazon and Canadian equivalent Chapters <[www.chapters.ca](http://www.chapters.ca)> (which runs the biggest bricks-and-mortar book retail business in the country) are dropping like stones. Adding insult to injury, their independence as online businesses is also waning. Just as bricks-and-mortar stores with good brand-name recognition are finally establishing a strong online presence, the big Internet equivalents are finding that they have to strike alliances with them in order to keep on top of their wholesale costs and inventories – something that would have been anathema to them only a year earlier, when many online businesses were smugly proclaiming their independence from the physical world of storefronts.

In many markets, consumer-to-consumer or small-business-to-consumer businesses may just be able to carve out the niche they need to erode the market share of these big Internet players. If enough niche-carving happens, the game will change forever. What's more, there is a whole hayrack of new technologies coming down the road that do their utmost to make that change happen.

### **The End of Hierarchy? Peer-to-Peer Networking**

Napster is currently in the process of discovering just how scary championing new technology can be. Facing suits filed by everyone from the RIAA to Metallica and Dr. Dre, they are the heat-sink for a societal feeding frenzy over intellectual property. Current copyright laws reflect the conditions in which they evolved: a hierarchical restricted economy, where media content could be cut into chunks, packaged and sold for whatever price the distributors wanted. But the Internet has eliminated the need for physical chunking and packaging. Any form of content – music, video, text, computer games, spoken word – can be digitized. Once it is, the choice of packaging – CD, cassette, videotape, hard drive, DVD, CD-ROM, encrypted file – is irrelevant and even unnecessary.

This is not a manifesto; it's a statement of fact. We're skeptical of that hoary old saw of Internet folk-wisdom, 'Information wants to be free.' Information doesn't 'want' anything. In fact, data doesn't *become* information until someone wants *it*. Beforehand, it's just noise. There are plenty of people on the Net who don't give a rat's ass about MP3s, and to them, file-sharing technology is merely a drain on server resources (noise) that makes it difficult for them to get their e-mail, play Quake, or check the stock market. But the implications of a fluid information medium like the Internet are immense: due to its very structure, the Internet causes the eruption of gift economies into mainstream life and the temporary inversion of the rules of business-as-usual.

Napster isn't the only peer-to-peer network (P2P) out there, just the one that's likely to be martyred for the cause. Services such as Hotline <[www.bigredh.com](http://www.bigredh.com)>, Publius <[cs1.cs.nyu.edu/waldman/publius/](mailto:cs1.cs.nyu.edu/waldman/publius/)>, Freenet <[freenet.sourceforge.net](http://freenet.sourceforge.net)> and Gnutella <[gnutella.wego.com](http://gnutella.wego.com)> have also garnered huge followings by giving Internet users exactly what they want – the unbridled ability to connect to each other, to run projects, build community...and to swap contraband files: porn, MP3 music files, full-length feature films that haven't been released on video yet, pirated fonts and cracked software. 'Giving away power to get power' at this level is scary to most companies, perhaps with good reason.

For some people, that translates into carnival, dancing in the streets, unBirthday parties where stuff that normally costs something is available for nothing. For others, it's just a big group of idiots blocking traffic.

## Son of Napster

But even if the metaphorical cops do manage to clear off part of the infobahn by shutting down Napster, P2P isn't going to disappear. The gift economy can't be suppressed any more than it can entirely replace a restricted economy. If Napster goes down, something else will take its place – quickly. People who get all hot and bothered about file-sharing always forget about the existence of the USENET alt.binaries groups, which have been around for many years more than Napster and are still going strong. Napster wasn't the first place to find contraband content on the Net, and it won't be the last.

When Nullsoft released the first beta copy of Gnutella, it only took parent company AOL a couple of hours to notice and to rip the software off the Web. The ramifications of such a tool scared AOL poopless. But even a couple of hours was too late: thousands of copies had already been downloaded. Gnutella was out and replicating like wildfire. Dozens of Gnutella clones and alternate distributions popped up almost overnight. Yet because there's no central Gnutella server, there's no one to sue. And after Gnutella, there will be other forms of P2P and technologies that we can only imagine. Try this on for size: hordes of kids with wireless Linux-powered digital sound-and-video recorders like the Yopy, scooping new-release movies straight off the theatre screen; ditto for sporting events, live concerts, and stuff on their friends' stereos and TVs, hitting a button and their wireless omnicorder immediately dials into the net and is connected by Gnutella Mark VII to millions of other devices just like it, whose users then pick and choose from what what they want to view next; microwave uploads and downloads occurring at blinding speed, and no one is ever connected to the network long enough to even be identified, let alone caught. Cool.

It's ironic: shutting down Napster will simply create a worse nightmare for the RIAA than the one that already exists, because the copyright violators will be much harder to track down. With Napster intact, there would be at least the possibility of extracting some sort of licensing fee from its users to pay artists their royalties.

P2P raises more questions than it answers, but that's what new technology always does. Thomas Edison thought the chief use for the phonograph was going to be storing the voices of dead relatives for nostalgic value. Modern typewriters had been around for about fifteen years before someone invented touch-typing. The major gift-economy question for business is, what do you *get* when you give this kind of power? Part of the picture is notoriety, support and even loyalty. For some people – some *heavy* people – evidently that's enough for the time being. Venture capital loves file-sharing this year, pumping \$15 million into Napster despite the apparent lack of any business model *and* the court cases to contend with.

So where *is* the business model in all of this? Well, there's always the development of new encrypted file formats to consider – a growth industry because there will always be clever 15-year-olds who figure out how to crack them. Or businesses could take their lead from Gnute <www.gnute.com>, the first search engine to target the Gnutella network, and start building portals for the new P2P networks. And, for those with absolutely no shame, you can spam those new networks. Flatplanet.net, developers of a program called ShareZilla, have created a way of hijacking user queries and replacing them with advertising. Rob Smith, a FlatPlanet partner, says 'People are upset that they have to look at an ad because it gets in the way of stealing music. It's a little laughable.'<sup>[5]</sup> And it is. But there were enough complaints to FlatPlanet's ISP that they took down the Web site. The future is anyone's call.

The biggest, currently unanswerable questions underneath all of the P2P hoo-ha are as follows:

- Will P2P change the structure and use patterns of the Internet as greatly as the Web did?
- What will happen to our notion of copyright and ownership of intellectual property?

Stay tuned. As with the majority of paradigm-shifting Internet plays, there needs to be some faith that the 'what you get' will shake out later. If the history of unBirthday Party technologies is any indication, the answer will be, at least, entertaining.

## Talking Back To The Net

Empowering others is the idea at the very core of Internet philosophy. Long before the business world had even heard of the Napster or the Web, users, programmers and engineers were already doing what they could to spread control over communications into as many hands as possible. They believed in decentralizing power and giving it away. This is probably why the Internet has worked so well as a collaborative, many-to-many technology.

But it hasn't always worked. There are lots of examples of 'give power away' Internet ideas that went astray or ended up nowhere.

Take USENET, for example. Before the Web exploded, it was the major public medium on the Internet. Composed of thousands of completely public 'newsgroups' on all manner of topics, USENET was a democratic many-to-many medium. People said what they wanted. If others disagreed, they simply said so. If some one was spouting bullshit, they were challenged at the least, and in most cases, they were 'flamed' by other indignant users. USENET was a thriving and often very noisy democracy. It was people media, not drone media.

But two developments caused its downfall: spam and the Web. By now, everyone knows what spam is. But it came as a rude surprise to the long-term USENET community when unscrupulous capitalists came stomping through USENET like a herd of elephants across a well-tended flowerbed (The first really serious spammers were a pair of shameless lawyers based in Arizona named Canter and Siegel, who, in early 1994, posted ads for their firm in virtually every unmoderated newsgroup in USENET). There were many valiant attempts to stop spam: the CancelMoose, the RealTime Blackhole and the Spam Hippo all struck blows for justice. But the flow of spam continued, and ultimately didn't change the essence of USENET itself.

At the same time, the Web was becoming popular and was changing the public perception of the Internet. Suddenly USENET couldn't attract the numbers anymore. But when seasoned Internet users looked at the Web, they didn't see a many-to-many democracy. They saw a network based on one-to-many publishing because the Web didn't including any inherent ability for readers or users to talk back, at least until Web annotation came along. USENET still exists and has some very loyal newsgroups. But nowadays, when people talk about the Internet, they're talking about the Web.

## **Swear Words and Fart Jokes**

In 1996, some early Internet users concerned about the Web's limitations started talking about creating a way to 'talk back to the Web'. They wanted to create a medium that would 'bring a little USENET to the Web' by allowing anyone to add comments to anyone else's Web page. The comments would be stored in a 'neutral' database and would appear when a user visited a site. The result was going to be a USENET-style dialogue between people who were currently visiting the site. Moreover, it would be completely outside of the control of the site's creators.

Web annotation was an important cause to its early advocates because it was seen as a way to prevent the Internet from becoming television. A friend of ours named Misha Glouberman - database programmer and early Internet prankster based in Toronto - wrote a paper on the subject in 1996. It started out like this:

It should be possible for anyone to add comments to any page on the Web. It's a single change that would make a tremendous difference to what our media will be like for years to come. Making it happen would be easier than you might think<sup>[6]</sup>.

Like many others, Misha believed that Web annotation was an essential political step if the Internet was going to continue as many-to-many people medium. So many Internet people held this perspective that the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) set up a working group to discuss the development of a Web annotation standard.

Web annotation advocates were right - adding comments to the Web was easier than we thought. Within a year or two, companies like Third Voice <www.thirdvoice.com>, Odigo <www.odigo.com> and Gooley <www.gooley.com> had appeared, providing the browser plug-ins and independent databases needed for people to comment on Web sites. They gave the plug-in away for free, and people started talking.

The problem was what they started talking about.. Typical comments tended to be along the lines of Beavis and Butthead dialogue: 'This sucks' or

'Where's the naked chicks?'. The constructive debate that Web annotation visionaries had hoped for never emerged. Giving power to the people didn't create a more democratic Web. It created a schoolyard full of swear words and fart jokes.

To a certain extent, the shortcomings of conversation on web annotators are inherent to the medium. Noam Chomsky has argued for years that it's impossible to stage an intelligent argument in TV sound bites, so why should anyone expect to be able to do so in a tiny thought balloon?

As of April 2000, Third Voice 2000 Beta 1 has been available for download. Unlike previous versions of the Web annotation software, which had used tiny triangular markers to indicate notes (markers which became infamous because they caused carefully aligned Web graphics to move out of their allotted places), the new Third Voice uses orange underlines to indicate hotlinks to specific words on a page (Be careful: there could be ads lurking under some of those links. You've been spammed again, anarchist boy!).

But Third Voice committed one of the cardinal errors of the software industry when they implemented the new version: they made the new technology incompatible with its older versions. And users did more than grumble. Third Voice's chief opposition, Say No To Third Voice <[www.saynotothirdvoice.com](http://www.saynotothirdvoice.com)>, makes the following observation: 'Interestingly, the sites we visited with the new version have no excitement, acknowledgement or bru-ha-ha over the new release. Are there any active Third Voice users out there?'

## The Limits of Power

Why do Slashdot and Napster work so well, and why did Web annotation fail so badly? After all, they're all commonspace technologies that give away power online, and empower users to connect with each other, to create collective knowledge. Why the difference?

Clearly, just coming up with an idea that 'gives away power' or connects people isn't enough on its own. There are other factors that determine a product's success: timing, media attention, word of mouth, design, accidents of history. It's an organic thing. Some things work, some don't.

In the case of Web annotation, it was probably a matter of an overly complex solution to a simple problem, combined with the problems that result from attempting to convince a large, unruly group of strong-minded individuals that they should place their faith in a proprietary technology. The emergence of the Web didn't erase the ability of people to talk back online. In fact, USENET has grown a great deal since the advent of the Web. And people have found lots of other ways to feed comment on what's on the Web. They use their own Web pages to comment on others. They find appropriate discussion forums and mail lists. In the final analysis, a dedicated tool for talking about the content of specific pages probably just wasn't needed.

On the flipside, Slashdot and Napster have struck a chord at just the right time. They have given people a power they've been itching for. In doing so, they have built loyal user followings and demonstrated that you can win by giving away power on the Internet... as long as you're prepared to deal with the full implications of the abrogation of power.

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