Commonspace - Chapter Three (It

In both internetworked markets and among intranetworked workers, people are speaking to each other in powerful new ways.

The real difference between the Internet and all preceding media forms lies in its relationship to the public. Online, people aren't just the audience – they are also the content. The Internet is made of people.

Most forms of media from the last the last five hundred years (and there have been many of them; just check out the stack of corpses over at the Dead Media Project <www.well.com/user/jonl/deadmedia/>) weren't really made of people. They were made of producers and audiences, publishers and readers, talkers and listeners: binary opposites that establish rigid roles, with ideas flowing downstream, from the one with the knowledge to the many who thirsted for it. Before the Internet, the culmination of the top-down media model was big newspaper chains, broadcast TV, and Hollywood . Solid, predictable spectacle.

But the number of car chases, explosions, celebrity divorces, Backstreet Boys and episodes of Survivor any culture can absorb is finite. Spectacle has become boring, mind-numbing and repressive, and, thanks to the Internet, we actually have an opportunity at hand to institute a different way of doing things.

The Internet is the nail in the coffin of the disenfranchised spectator. Everyone can potentially see everyone else, whether in name or in action. More importantly, we all become a part of the show. People don't go online for the passive spectacle of a Disneyland parade, but for the collective carnival that we produce by being online together.

Think about how the Internet has changed the process of storytelling:

Then ...

For our grandparents, the central narrative arrived in town every Saturday at the Bijou. After weeks or months trundling through the typewriters of paid hacks and the corners of big studio back lots, the Lone Ranger would jump off the screen in all of his predictability. He'd pick up where he had left off last week and end up where he was headed next week. And then all the kids would head home, don their masks and reenact the thin gruel of culture that flowed from the founts of Hollywood .

Now ...

In contrast, the central narrative for our children begins and ends within the game itself. In places like Battle.net or Ultima Online, hundreds of thousands of people weave tales of knights and sorcerers, noble alien races and bloodthirsty humans. The narrative unfolds in real time and is constantly changing. What's more, it no longer comes from the pens of paid hacks. It comes from the collective dreams of the players. As a product of 'the collective mind' it is engaging, compelling, magical.

'Now' is the time of commonspace, the many-to-many online world where audiences are simultaneously the performers in the main attraction.

The Electric Carnival

When describing the novels of Dostoyevsky, the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin used the metaphor of *carnival*, 'a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act.'[1] Yet Bakhtin could just as easily have been talking about the Web.

Of course, the many-to-many power of the Internet is changing more than just the process of storytelling. Business, Ideas, Politics, Music, Government, Games and Community – all of our institutions are morphing into strange new forms as the Internet enables us to work, play and act collectively. In such an environment, we are able to choose new methods of interacting with the people, projects and products that interest us. We feel more wanted and more engaged. We get and give more resources than we had access to in the one-to-many world. As a result, it becomes possible to make money, spend time, write books, build friendships, and start communities more quickly, effectively and enjoyably than has ever been possible before.

If this trend continues, the staid one-to-many ways of doing things are not long for this world.

One-to-Many, Many, Many

So how did we end up here?

Gutenberg's print revolution in the 1500s symbolizes the erosion of the biggest one-to-many medium in recorded history – the Catholic Church. By making print cheap and easy, Gutenberg broke the Church's iron grip on the flow of information. Pamphlets were printed in the rough-and-tumble workaday language of the people (i.e. *not* Latin) and circulated as the printed word had never been circulated before. New ideas about God, religion, and power moved swiftly across Germany and the rest of Europe. As the Church's stranglehold on information disappeared, its monopoly on truth quickly followed suit.

Fast-forward to Thomas Paine and the American Revolution. According to legend, Paine used his printing press to spread the idealistic dream of a free society run by the people (well, actually by the men who owned land, but even revolution happens one step at a time), a society that balanced commerce and government, opportunity and the public good. His pamphlets found their way to all corners of the town commons – the tavern, the office, the church, the park. And as they moved, they helped build the fires of revolution. Just like Gutenburg, Paine and his printing press helped the 'little guy' pull down tired old ideas and replace them with new ones.

Fast-forward to the last half of the twentieth century. What happened to the little guy and all the new ideas?

When we think of the printing press now, we picture the faceless, industrial *ker-chunk, ker-chunk* of the factory floor. We see black-and-white *Citizen Kane* images of newspapers plopping off the press and onto the back of a truck, then distributed to a crew of plucky orphans in old shoes and floppy hats who deliver them to Norman Rockwell-style suburban white dads reading said papers in their slippers while smoking a pipe. At the dawn of a new millennium, print technology represents the orthodox, the inaccessible, the conservative and the boring.

... how did we end up with this?
Hearst Newspaper *(1930s)*
Audience
Audience
Audience
Audience
Audience
If myth says print started like this ...
The Church
People
People
People
People
People
Gutenberg + Luther

How is it that we started with hot-blooded revolution and got stuck with slippers and pipes? How did we end up with monolithic one-to-many media models, corporations, workplaces and schools? Blame it on the nature of the technology, and on a society that was content to use that technology in the most obvious way.

Certainly, the printing press has always lent itself to one-to-many communication. Even if you want to run a small newspaper or distribute political pamphlets, you need a press, paper and a distribution network. Print doesn't lend itself to massive dialogues between groups of people, or even two-way conversations. It is driven by small groups with a passionate message to communicate, or by publishers who see a mass-market of information consumers. The fact that print technology is cheaper and faster than groups of scribbling monks or the fussy and bureaucratic British colonial army made it an excellent tool for early revolutionaries. But it's never been a 'many-to-many' medium, not by a long shot.

As Marshall McLuhan observed in *Understanding Media*, the way that print culture organizes people as isolated individuals is antithetical to the ideals of an online culture:

Perhaps the most significant of the gifts of typography to man was that of detachment and noninvolvement – the power to act without reacting. Science since the Renaissance has exalted this gift which has become an embarrassment in the electric age, in which all people are involved in all others at all times.[2]

Because of this detachment, print was natural tool for the top-town, people-unfriendly world of the industrial era. At the level of social control, print helped to reinforce the command-and-control models of the military and big business. As a result, print eventually came to mean what it does today: words are written by professionals owned and paid for by 'the company'. There is no longer room for heretics like Luther or Paine, who might offend the audience or, worse, the advertisers. As society gradually sucked all of the fun and revolutionary potential out of print technology, the medium grudgingly came to fit with – and eventually reinforce – the rigid, de-skilled, industrial world that emerged around it.

Radio Killed the Radio Star

Radio had a lot of potential in the early days. Much like the Internet, it started out as method for many-to-many military communication. Every radio set had both a transmitter and a receiver. Communication was cheap and provided limitless multi-directional connections within a certain radius. You could hold a conversation between two parties (ship-to-shore) or many parties (the whole fleet). It was a promising example of a many-to-many technology.

By the 1920s, radio had fallen into the hands of 'amateurs', and the uses of radio had exploded well beyond the two-way transmission of logistical information. Friends played records to each other over the airwaves (smells like teen Napster!). Churches organized remote services complete with two-way hymn singing. Unions organized workers over the airwaves. Classes complete with question-and-answer sessions were held between the bedrooms and dens of amateur radio operators. Community and collective media were emerging – from the bedrooms, basements and garages of the 'little guy.' And this time, you didn't have to be a landowner to play.

And then it happened: society nerfed radio. RCA did the previously unthinkable and started pushing radio sets without transmitters (Imagine if, all of a sudden, you could only *receive* e-mail!). Sponsored soap operas began to glob up the airwaves. The final nail in the coffin came when the U.S. government made it illegal to be a radio 'amateur'. By 1934, only people with commercial aims and big bucks could get radio licenses. Call it the landowners' revenge, if you like.

Despite the fact that radio began as a many-to-many technology, it ended up stuck in the same old one-to-many rut as print. The one-to-many mode of thinking had been so ingrained in people's minds – especially in the minds of the people who made money from media by restricting access to it – that there was no way radio stood a chance of remaining a many-to-many medium. Society trumped technology, and the 'broadcast model' was born. Taking its cues from existing print empires, radio stations (and television stations after them) became one-way pimps for the spectacle. With the exception of a few stars, 'people' became more entrenched as the faceless, atomized audience.

Disconnected from each other.

Disconnected from the people telling the stories.

Disconnected even from the people selling them soap.

Drones.

And so it was, not only in media, but also in business, school and family: orders and info from the top, no room for the little guy or new ideas. Just a steady, predictable monochrome world – of drones.

And so it went, for a long, long, time.

Many, Many, Many-to-Many, Many, Many

In contrast to the forms of media that were already grumpy and sclerotic by the Eisenhower era, it's easy to see how the Internet still holds the potential to be different. In top-down media, the audience simply sees the media product and 'the stars'. Through the Internet, we are beginning to see each other.

As a result, we're behaving differently. Certainly in the top-down, assembly-line parts of the world (and there are still many of them, because many different eras of technological development still exist cheek-by-jowl), corporate generals lead armies of workers to produce goods in the slow, traditional way. But here and there, workers are starting to operate without bosses. New products are flying out of basements and garages on a just-in-time basis. In a top-down world, conformity and follow-the-leader were the order of the day. But the game is changing, and the new rules are all about diversity and opportunity.

The transformations that the Internet has brought about require both the right technological conditions *and* the right cultural context. The world we live in is a mix of the technology we're using and the modes of thought that drive the use of the technology:

Print	*One-to-many*	+	*Industrial thinking*	=	*Drones.*
Radio + TV	*Many-to-many*	+	*Industrial thinking*	=	*Drones.*
Internet	*Many-to-many*	+	*Commonspace thinking*	=	*People.*

The Internet isn't creating these changes on its own. Rather, it is the fertile field for the kind of thinking that creates commonspace, thinking that has seeped out of the hacker margins to transform the mainstream.

At the core of the thinking behind the commonspace model is the idea that given the option, we would rather be people than drones. Of course, no one wants to be a drone (except maybe Gary Numan, Kraftwerk, and other proponents of new wave music. But in the end, history dealt with them swiftly and harshly). And it's unlikely that we ever really were. If we had been, we would never have seen rock, hippies, punk or hiphop. We'd still be listening to Glenn Miller. Or Gary Numan.

Welcome to the Cubicle Farm

Old habits die hard. Despite our cherished notions about the deep-seated human drive to be creative individuals, we persist in acting like drones. We still give ourselves role that are rigid, limited and tied to heirarchical organizations. We cut ourselves off from each other, creating a Dilbert world of tiny cubicles where even the average prisoner in a federal penitentiary has more room to move. (It could be worse: you could be stuck in a port-a-potty. After all, you have a laptop, right?)

But with the many-to-many culture of the Internet, the Dilbert world has the potential to change. Anyone has the potential to take on many roles at once. We can be producer, shopper, audience, friend or foe in the wink of an eye. While flitting between these roles and inventing new ones, we shed the rigidity that's required of drones and gain the opportunity to become people, creators, equals. When we start to climb over the cubicle walls, we see others all around us, shifting their roles and creating their dreams.

Eggheads in Fishnets

A group of cross-discipline knowledge, media and design academics at the University of Toronto describe their work style as a 'fishnet'. Connected by the Internet and intranets, they work together on collaborative projects. At any moment in time, any one 'knot' – or person – in the net can be pulled up. This person is the leader for the project for the moment. At another time, other knots can be pulled up in the same manner. Everyone is a leader and everyone is a collaborator.

U of T's fishnet is an example of a new type of online organization – one with fluid leadership. As Bakhtin points out in his description of the carnivalesque modern world, the inversion of traditional structures of authority is inevitable.[3] In the carnival of the Internet, everyone takes turns being leader and follower. And as ideas flow from online communities out into our culture, traditional hierarchies will weaken.

There is a strong connection between our shifting roles, the weakening of hierarchies, and the prevalence of collective, cooperative work online. If we take a close look at traditional roles, we can see how they are changing:

Bosses + Workers		Teams
Producers + Audience		Participants
Teachers + Students		Learners
Experts + The Masses	**Become**	Collective Minds
Professionals + Clients		Hackers
Marketers + Markets		Transparent Data Trails
Sellers + Buyers		Traders

The fluidity of these new roles lend themselves to a flat, collective way of working.

It's important to stress that the roles people need to assume in commonspace are neither rigid nor immediately obvious. Bosses and workers don't become teams simply because someone says so. The shift is more subtle and (sometimes) scary than that. You have to experience it and play with it to understand it. But it's a hell of a lot more fun than carrying pollen back to the hive.

The Un-Chain of Command

Back in 1997, one of us (Darren) was employed on a project to write a video-game strategy manual with a team consisting of a project manager, a designer, and a play tester. The project manager and designer were at opposite ends of the city of Toronto, connected to each other by an intranet and the telephone. The playtester was in the Phillipines. There was no face-to-face communication for the entire team – ever. The entire project took place in commonspace. Aside from e-mail, we communicated almost constantly via ICQ, which is an ideal device for sending quick query notices and organizing impromptu online conferences.

We began the project each in our respective roles. But as our communication developed, so did our roles, shifting as various skills became known. Darren wound up doing a lot of organizing as well as writing, the project manager became an editor, the play-tester took on the design of charts and tables, and the designer offered arcane bits of technical advice. In a more structured situation, these skills might have gone unnoticed, and the finished product would have been much less competent as a result.

People like working on the Internet because of this blurring of role divisions. They perceive that the playing field is more level. Exactly how 'level' it really is corresponds to a number of factors, including the physical distance between workers and the amount of context ported over from the physical world. The further apart workers are physically, the fewer organizational imperatives from the regular work environment they have to deal with, and the greater their ability to define (and change) their own roles in commonspace.

If it also sounds messy and chaotic, that's because it is. But people are enjoying it. Typing messages, zipping back and forth through commonspace, reading e-mail, chatting – it all still possesses that 'gee-whiz' Tom Swift quality that makes it fun to use. And it makes us feel good, reminding us – rightly or wrongly – of the intimacy of village life, where people always interact with familiarity, human-ness and little smiley faces :-).

Reciprocity and the fluidity of roles also has a leveling effect on narratives. Collective narratives change the teller and ultimately the world. In commonspace, everyone takes turns weaving new patterns into a collective story, or beginning entirely new 'threads', like storytellers around a fire. The opportunity to participate is compelling because storytelling is an empowering and transformative act. The philosopher Walter Benjamin points out that retelling stories not only allows the teller to assimilate the tale into their own life experience, which makes it relevant for them (and changes them in the process); but it also allows them to embed a trace of themselves into the tale, a trace that will persist through all future tellers of that story.[4]

Collective storytelling is the entire purpose of Impromanga <www.impromanga.org>, a site where participants construct sophisticated collective visual narratives in the style of Japanese comics ('manga'). The narrative evolves as new contributions appear. Even though it's possible simply to read the story, the assumption is that readers will write. Each new reader is automatically told which chapter will be theirs if they choose to contribute. The result is an exciting, organic story-line that reflects the personalities and imaginations of all the contributors.

People Replace Drones

Fluidity, commonality and reciprocity are the three factors that determine how many-to-many collaboration works in commonspace. Online communities help people feel like citizens again, reinjecting optimism and civic pride into even the most Grinch-like hearts. Where society makes us feel limited to pointless roles, commonspace offers opportunities to engage as free citizens. Online, we define the rules of the communities. We set

the standards and act on them. We laud those that contribute or banish those who cause harm.

Hence the popularity of community. The WELL alone has over 260 active conferences. AOL, the largest private online service, has over 15,000 chat rooms in operation. And then there's good old USENET: a full daily feed is dozens of gigs of data from over 35,000 newsgroups. Given the number of people online, finding or building communities of interest is not difficult, no matter how 'specialized' an interest might seem. (After you've spent a little while exploring some of the dodgier corners of the Internet, you'll see what we mean. As Elvis Costello sang, we used to be disgusted, but now we're just amused).

My Employer Can Blow Me

AOL's infamous purchase of Netscape in 1998 is a good example of exactly how wrong things can go when a top-down approach is imposed over a commonspace network. Seumas Froemke <www.seumas.com>, employed by Netscape as part of the Sun Alliance, explains the culture of Netscape before the merger:

Netscape is not supposed to be IBM. Netscape used to be the dyed-hair, pierced-whatever, jeans and tee-shirt, nerf-dart-infested, pool-playing, laughter-filled Internet company. We invented the web-browser. We were the first true Internet company.

...and the management structure afterwards:

When Netscape sold out to AOL, many employees left with their stock options which just happened to have vested during the same time period. Those who remained were mostly split up into two groups – AOL (client) employees and Sun/iPlanet (server) employees. Through an odd and yet not completely explained circumstance, there are Sun employees working on the browser and in management on the AOL side and AOL employees working on the server side with Sun....

[E]ach of us end up having two sets of badges (a Sun badge and an AOL badge). We also end up having two managers (if you're a Sun employee). I'm a Sun employee and iPlanet is a Sun company, but it has AOL employees too. And AOL managers. So my division manager is an AOL employee, even though he's the manager of a division in a Sun company. I also have a Sun manager who is not the manager of the same Sun division, but is required to sign-off on any paperwork or technicalities that my AOL manager needs for those of us who are Sun employees.

The results of this kind of nightmarish bureaucracy on employee morale are neatly summed up by ex-Netscape/Mozilla employee Jamie Zawinski <www.jwz.org>: 'My employer can blow me.'

While corporate executives were dreaming up dot-com empires to preside over, teams were replacing workers. The new worker expected more than top-down communication:

Management
Workers
Workers
Workers
Management
Workers
Workers
Workers
information

E-mail was a key player in this shift. Workers became able to 'carbon copy' email messages to each other, create document loops to guide workflow, and establish mailing lists to target specific slices of an enterprise. Because no single person controls the communication now, workers have begun to regard each other as equals, regardless of their pay-cheque. Furthermore, e-mail has made communications transparent and replicable, so that workers are beginning to expect to be kept appraised of what's going on.

By the time intranets arrived on the scene, the technological stage was set for teamwork. Intranets introduced a whole new set of sophisticated tools for fine-tuning workflow and collaboration, such as document checkout and version control, digital bulletin boards and messaging, and charting and polling software. More importantly, people within companies who had never talked to each other before started forming relationships. Information flowed where there had previously been secrets. As a result, some businesses – the ones that 'got it' – started creating new kinds of roles within new kinds of companies. Of course, there were and still are many businesses that *didn't* get it. But some day soon, their desiccated corpses will line the shoulders of the information highway like so much roadkill.

And some industries really *are* 'getting it.' For instance, the New York City-based e-STEEL Corporation <www.e-steel.com>, the leading negotiation-based, neutral e-Commerce marketplace for steel products, counts nearly 3,000 companies from 90 countries among its membership. E-STEEL uses b2bScene document management system to coordinate huge projects that span the globe. When a bastion of the industrial revolution like the steel industry decides to use commonspace to improve its operations, it's obvious that even the oldest dog can profit from some new tricks.

Everyone's A Producer

'But what I really want to do is direct.' Really? You're in luck.

Like most of the societal structures that formed during the Industrial Revolution, the mega-print/broadcast model is hierarchical. It assumes that content flows downward from select pens, keyboards, microphones and cameras. Not surprisingly, most of these pens are located in the world's cultural Meccas: if you want to create a great magazine, you move to New York; if you want to make a movie, you move to Hollywood or India.

In some ways, this system makes sense, because concentration feeds creative synergy. On the other hand, concentrated hierarchies assume that unless you've bothered to scramble up the greasy corporate media ladder in the big town of your choice, you have nothing useful to say.

Wrong.

Commonspace is causing huge changes in the relationships between 'media producers' and 'media consumers.' The first five years of the Internet explosion have shown that amazing media products can appear out of the boondocks, courtesy of small guy with the computer. You don't have to look hard or long to find powerful examples, many of which began outside the big centres of media production:

ICQ

The first and still the best chat software in the world was invented in 1996 by four Israelis, all under the age of 27. Their servers were the first to handle 100,000 concurrent users online, and at their peak hours now handle hundreds of thousands of users at once.

Doom/Quake

On February 1, 1991, somewhere in the environs of Mesquite, Texas, John Carmack and his buddies began the most powerful videogame dynasty in the world, producing the insanely popular *Doom* and *Quake* titles. Quake is the nearest thing to an official sport that the Internet has. At one point, there were millions more copies of its predecessor *Doom* in circulation than there were legal copies of Microsoft Windows to run it on.

Mosaic/Netscape

The first of the Internet startups was founded in 1994 by Dr. James H. Clark (the founder of Silicon Graphics) and Marc Andreessen (creator of NCSA Mosaic, the first graphic-interface Web browser, while he was still an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaigne). At one point, Netscape was the fastest-growing software company in history, and it's still the blueprint that most Internet startups aspire to match.

Hotmail

Indian-born Sabeer Bhatia, the inventor of Hotmail, made $400 million from the sale of his Webmail service to Microsoft.

The Blair Witch Project

Equipped only with a couple of cameras and $22,000 of borrowed money, three film students from Maryland created a horror mockumentary. Relying mainly on the viral power of the Internet to spread their word, they gross $1.5 million in the first week of independent release and $29 million in the first week of wide release.

Many-to-many communication allows anyone anywhere to demonstrate that they have something useful to say. Of course, commonspace also provides a forum for a lot of fools spouting an astonishing variety of garbage. We don't have to provide any examples: you'll run across plenty of crap all on your own. But then again, Hollywood, network TV and good-old fashioned newsprint continue to produce endless streams of useless and offensive information by the minute. Online as anywhere else, we all need to keep our bullshit detectors and other heuristic tools in peak working

order.

Death of the Author

Anybody can be a writer too. Consider this exerpt from an Ultima Online role-playing game site <www.uo.com> titled 'Adventures on Dagger Island':

The cool fog caressed Jean-Luc's face as the ship moved closer to the island shore. This was not a trip he had wanted to make; but the guild had a new home on the island, and the guildstone was needed there. Mist, his faithful steed for so many years now, shuffled and neighed behind him. Perhaps it was the cold, or perhaps the mare felt the same sense of foreboding that he himself felt.

It's not Shakespeare. But it's at least as good as the prose in the average heroic fantasy potboiler. And as writers such as this one become more experienced with collective authorship, the average quality of writing will improve. The important lesson here is that an audience is often as good as – or better – at 'writing the story' than a real writers and producers.

That's because online collective authorship goes beyond the design team and down to the level of the players. In network games, everyone who plays is helping to author the unfolding story. Actual play is dramatic enough, but it's also of sufficient interest to other players of the game that particular matches are often reported after the fact as either a sporting event or story. On Starcraft.org <www.starcraft.org>, one of the larger sites for players of Blizzard's hit real-time strategy game Starcraft, tournament games, complete with stills and captured action sequences, are reported in painstaking detail. Likewise, on numerous sites for Ultima Online, such as <www.uo.com>, players retell significant encounters, battles and community events, sometimes even in streaming audio.

Yet collective authorship isn't just about creating stories in the traditional sense. Online audiences are also authoring huge knowledge bases and research projects. Take the Open Directory Project <www.dmoz.org> as a stellar example. This huge weblogging initiative (bigger than Yahoo!) uses volunteers to describe and categorize online content. The content contributed by average people is just as important (and as relevant) as the content created by paid researchers. So how successful has this project been? The directory sections of many of the large search engines are now powered by Open Directory.

Everything$_2$

There are also some truly original efforts, like Everything$_2$ <www.everything2.org>, a collaboratively filtered database whose contents are created by its users and a small army of volunteers. Users create 'nodes' that are heavily hyperlinked to other nodes onsite. The Everything$_2$ FAQ provides a motto for commonspace in general: 'you are the most important person here.' In the words of side administration team member 'dem bones' [all underlined words are hyperlinks],

Everything$_2$ is what you make of it, that's the bottom line. It's open-ended, open-minded and waiting for you. You can node your diary, CD collection, dreamlog, notes on the apocalypse or a recipe for fettucine alfredo. You can sit around and read what other people have written. You can recommend changes in the system. You can do almost anything you want to provide you spell it right...

Everything is an ever-growing, pulsating database that moves through cyberspace like a death-borg... slowly collecting and assimilating information and nonsense until... until...

Until it knows all.

Currently it's impossible to link from within Everything$_2$ to external sites, because the site's creators didn't want to turn Everything$_2$ into 'just another portal.' But since the code is open source, there's no reason that anyone who knows how to code couldn't re-engineer it to link externally. However, this doesn't mean that you can't link *in*to Everything$_2$ from outside. Slashdot has taken advantage of this fact to use Everything$_2$ as its official glossary. Terms that the editors feel may be unfamiliar to their readers are hyperlinked from a [?] that follows the term to the appropriate Everything$_2$ node. But this is just one possible application. Part of the excitement of new commonspace technology like Everything$_2$ is its capacity to be turned it into something else by someone with a vision. Gentlemen, start your engines.

None of the above should be taken as suggesting that movies or TV professional journalism are dead. But we are saying that in online culture, the distinctions between author and reader are disappearing. The audience is no longer a pool of receptive eyeballs. It is a connected, active group of people with both voices and ears. They are singing and playing together, like a roomful of musicians riffing off of each other, playing deep into the night.

As Markets, We See Each Other

While we all make fun of plaid-jacketed, pompadoured hucksters and hard-sell infomercials, buying and selling is not an inherently bad thing. After all, we need the basics of life and a few opportunities to throw our money after things that thrill us. But the problem with the soon-to-be-extinct industrial media marketplace of the last century was precisely this: it didn't produce things to meet our needs or even to thrill us. It has simply produced – and expected us to consume what it produced. In short, it hasn't listened to us.

But some companies are trying hard to listen now. While many factors have influenced this change, the Internet is one of the biggest. As the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* point out, the Internet is turning markets are back into conversations. This means that buyers are talking to each other, not just about what they want and need, but about what they don't like as well. Smart companies are listening to these conversations and joining in on them.

It's not hard to find examples. Just take a look at any of the *epinion.com*-style rating sites. Or on mailing listings. Or on discussion boards on Web sites. Or, in the granddaddy of them all, USENET. Here's a recent conversation about United Airlines that we found in the UseNet group <rec.travel.airlines>:

Subject: What's up with United?

Date: 07/11/2000

Author: xxx@wenet.net

I just had a fairly lousy return trip ORF -> ORD -> SFO. on Sunday 7/9.

[snip]

My question, rta-ers, is what have you heard of rumors that UA is having a work slowdown, hence lots of minor mechanical problems and severe schedule disruptions? The ground staff had an OK attitude and seemed to do there best but I fee like booking my next flight on CO.

Subject: Re: What's up with United?

Date: 07/14/2000

Author: xxx@spammindspring.com

Strange indeed.

What are the odds that the two United flights I took ten days apart would both suffer instrument failure that delayed both your flights.

I flew on June 19 out of SMF, June 29 out of ORD.

Subject: Re: What's up with United?

Date: 07/15/2000

Author: xxx@my-deja.com

UAL has the lowest on-time rate in the industry right now...far worse than even America West. They also have the highest cancellation rate, most

complaints, and most lost luggage per 1,000 passengers.

But, they claim they are reducing their schedules in order to combat these problems. All I can say is, I'm staying away from them until they get through their labor negotiations.

Subject: Re: What's up with United?

Date: 07/15/2000

Author: xxx@webtv.net>

That's one of the questions Congress has asked about the UA/US merger: If UA can't arrive on time now, why let them gobble up another carrier?

As the dialog demonstrates, customers are no longer isolated from each other, wondering whether other people are also pissed off with a company's service, reduced to venting their frustrations though rants in the coffee shop. Now they can go online to check in with others. And the conversation is not just limited to service concerns. Everything from labour relations to honesty in customer communications to regulatory review is up for discussion. This changes things for business – dramatically.

But it doesn't mean that companies (and governments and non-profits) need to become nervous nellies watching their every word. In fact, it means just the opposite. When customers start to see each other and talk to each other, they start to demand a higher degree of honesty and forthrightness from the companies they patronize.

What connected customers want is for companies to stop dribbling treacly sentiments and join in the conversation.

Dear Users...

Making this switch can actually turn a company around in commonspace. Back in 1997, AOL was coming close being declared Public Enemy Number One by its 8 million subscribers. It had drastically oversold its unlimited pricing plan, and massively underestimated demand. The result was busy signals for everyone. Sure, the accounts were unlimited, but you couldn't get online to use them. People were pissed.

AOL CEO Steve Case turned the situation around with a series of apology letters. In these letters, he both admitted that AOL was wrong ('We clearly didn't go far enough in preparing for this'[5]) and provided a detailed description about how he was planning to fix the problem. What's astounding is not that Case wrote an apology letter – this is par for the corporate course. Rather, it's the honesty and speed of his response that was impressive for the time. He was right there when the problems began. He was right there with refunds and a clear and honest explanation of what was going on inside the company.

While none of this makes AOL a paragon of virtue, it does say something about how companies need to react when their customers can talk to each other. They need to be engaged and responsive. The companies who do this well go far beyond the AOL example by freeing up their people to participate directly in the conversation.

Digital Breadcrumbs

As we move around online, clicking on things, buying things, filling out forms, or simply loading a page into our browsers, we leave 'transparent data trails' behind us, the traces of where we've been and what we've done.. This data includes such information as the IP address of your computer, the URL of the page you're viewing, and the type and version of browser you used. More importantly, it records what links you clicked on, how long you stayed on a page, and what you bought. These 'digital breadcrumbs' provide clues about who you are, where you've been, and where you're likely to go next.

The ability to gather this kind of information may seem commonplace now, but it would have been mind-blowing five years ago. Companies used to spend hundreds of thousands of market research dollars to collect such data, and, for that reason, it would have been treated as a highly guarded secret. Now, it is automatically collected, sorted and (when the business in question is ethical) made available to customers – and even competitors.

Of course, most companies, even those that are online, still treat this kind of information as their own corporate property and do with it what they want. They keep their customers in the dark, cut off from each other. The question is, under such circumstances, how long will they remain customers – especially when competitor companies are opening up?

In November of 1999, Real Networks was hit with a class-action lawsuit because its RealJukebox assigned a personal ID number to users and uploaded information about their listening habits to Real.com's servers. Not that the lawsuit seemed to have much effect on their corporate policy. The Privacy Forum Digest for May 18, 2000 (< www.vortex.com/privacy/priv.09.15>) reports that the Real Networks/Netzip 'Download Demon' (recently renamed 'RealDownload'), a utility that automates and improves certain aspects of the downloading process for users, also links itself to all browsers on a system and sends file names and URLs for *all* files a user downloads back to the Real servers. Think about that one for a minute. Such gross invasions of privacy can only result in the alienation of customer bases that took years to build.

On the other hand, if a company keeps the data anonymous, aggregates it into general statistics, and makes it transparent to users, it can help us 'see each other' in ways not possible before. Amazon.com provides a positive example. Amazon uses the data trails generated by its customers to tell us how popular a book is among other buyers, what other titles have been purchased by customers who have bought the book, and what other people (sometimes including even the author and publisher) have thought and said about the book.

This application of anonymous aggregated data is useful to all of Amazon's users, without violating anyone's right to privacy. It also helps us see each other as we move through commonspace.

Resistance is Futile

Understanding the connections between people – customers, collaborators, partners and anonymous supporters – is now crucial to the success of any online activity. The world of the captains of industry and ignorant masses is being left behind. The 'masses' are becoming individual people, creators in both name and fact. Because we're unable to avoid each other any longer, 'we the people' are joining forces, in explicit (online conversations) and subtle (transparent data trails) ways. The nature of media, communication and business for all parties involved is changed, for good or bad.

Like it or not, we are no longer in the age of the hierarchical corporate army. We are entering the age of the collective. And even your matinee idols will change.

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[1] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics,* ed. & trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122.

[2] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor/Signet Books, 1964), 157.

[3] Bakhtin, 123.

[4] Benjamin, Walter. 'The Storyteller,' *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York; Schocken Books, 1985).

[5] Flores, Michele Matassa. "AOL swamped with new unlimited pricing plan; some users sue", *The Seattle Times*. Seattle, January 16, 1997. (Online at: http://augustachronicle.com/stories/011797/tech_aol.html).