Hello, **Dennis Knopf**

YOU AS IN USER
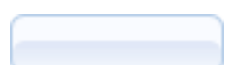## *AUDIENCE ECONOMICS AND THE WEB*

RSS

NEW! pro

DIRECTOR

LOGIN

Search

Continue shopping

Customers who bought this item also bought

✓ SUBSCRIBE

SOME RIGHTS RESERVED

Yes

GO

New!

Login

▲ advertisement

★★ A FAVE

myTubelickr™

a YAHOO! company

Trash Selected

Online Now!

INTRODUCTION

„The bursting of the dot-com bubble in the fall of 2001 marked a turning point for the web. Many people concluded that the web was overhyped, when in fact bubbles and consequent shakeouts appear to be a common feature of all technological revolutions. Shakeouts typically mark the point at which an ascendant technology is ready to take its place at center stage. The pretenders are given the bum's rush, the real success stories show their strength, and there begins to be an understanding of what separates one from the other.“[1]

Tim O'Reilly has tried to distinguish the „one from the other“ – today's architecture of the World Wide Web with its expedient „Design Patterns“ and „Business Models“[2] from its initial gestalt during the dotcom bubble of the 1990s – by coining the term *Web 2.0*: an improved, second version of the Web, looking at it as if it were software.

In fact, it seems that a paradigm shift has been taking place on the Web over the past few years, changing its structure from static presentations to frameworks for dynamic output, from simple pages to online applications, from commercial offerings to free services, from top-down production and distribution to a grassroots formation of user-generated content, and from read-only pages to sites for participation. Millions of users are filling the content pool, uploading their videos onto YouTube, writing articles for Wikipedia, making blog entries, setting up profiles on MySpace. As they connect with each other, tag and rate their work, the Web is developing into a giant semantic entity.

No wonder such an appraisement as the Web 2.0 becomes an immediate hype; everybody including technocrats and dabblers seem enthusiastic about the latest developments of the WWW.

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[1] *O'Reilly (2005).*
[2] *O'Reilly (2005).*

Enough reason for *Time Magazine* to pick „you" as the person of the year 2006: As „individuals are changing the nature of the information age, [...] the creators and consumers of user-generated content are transforming art and politics and commerce, [...] they are the engaged citizens of a new digital democracy."*3*

This new digital democracy is based on a real possibility of involvement and self-expression, the chance of being noticed instead of drowning „in obscurity"*4*. The separation between producer and consumer is being canceled by a system that fosters a participatory form of pop culture, where fans aggregate and post their favorite content, artists remix each other's works, and where the users' direct voting for content decides what makes it to the top. A loop of appropriation, modification and recirculation substitutes the classic form of one-way production, users become authors (*yousers?*).

Its current, more open structure doesn't only promise a rather democratic, user-determined Web; nowadays anybody can easily publish and distribute content for free, and the companies offering those so-called templates (the customizable frameworks for complex websites) find themselves able to collect an infinite amount of valuable information about its users, their habits, and their relations between each other. Appealing new business models with sources for precise marketing research seem to be at hand.

Only few seem to be skeptical, looking at today's conception of the Web rather as a new strategy of the culture industry. Does the people's Web have the potential to evolve into the most reliable source for market analysis and the most effective medium for ubiquitous advertisement? Can it represent the perfect feedback channel for the culture industry? Does the core value of today's Web hide underneath the hypocritical intention to offer a free service – hosting images, nursing social networks, providing

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3 **Grossman (2006).**
4 **Grossman (2006).**

search engines etc. – in the treasuring of intelligence about what's hot and what's not and who actually says so? Are there ways to steer those trends?

Money isn't primarily being made with advertisements and sold products any more, and the smart interplay of push- and pull-media as well as the right application of gathered information onto other fields of marketing seem to allow the engineering of a more sophisticated and differentiated mainstream – after all those free services are worth billions of dollars. Can the information from user databanks be easily applied onto existing marketing systems? There must be a secret agenda behind the new digital democracy.

However, the general attitude towards the Web 2.0 and both the providing and the usage of free templates for cultural production and distribution seems positive; it is being taken as a win/win situation. The hands-on usage and clear design of templates as its main characteristics make the Web 2.0 a handy tool for self-expression, enabling almost anybody to produce content on the fly. The fact, that the required effort for production has become relatively low results in a massive increase of content on the Web; as the technical barrier practically disappeared a wave of amateurish video, photography, music, and text is flooding the WWW. But if the new digital democracy means that everybody can join in the wave – how can one actually ride it?

In order to understand the current situation of online culture we need to look at technical and social preconditions, its cultural and economic aims as well as alternative conceptions. In the following chapters I will try to clarify both the motivation for participating in and reasons for building such a digital „democracy", investigating the postmodern phenomena of per-sonalization and individuality.

After a brief historical excursion about production strategies in chapter one I will point out the new practice of today's Web and compare it to early design proposals for a World Wide Web in chapter two.

In chapter three I will go further into why today's model differs from initial concepts, revealing commercial interests and strategies by questioning its functions. I will look at similar approaches in other fields of media and how they are being discussed. Finally, I will investigate the users' adoption of the situation, from simple-hearted usage to counterstrategies, from taking participatory action in the process of production to emancipating from it.

I. PRECONDITIONS: SOCIAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND CULTURAL

1. Individuality and the anonymity of metropolitan structures

Georg Simmel understands the metropolitan conditions of monetarism and anonymous social interaction as the main triggers for a general desire for individuality. Opposed to the clearly arranged structures of a small town the overly complicated patterns of the metropolis are based on rational dispassion and factual reason. The constant change of inner and external effects „with the speed and the variety of economic, occupational, and social life"[5] challenges the citizens to develop an intellect in order to process the overwhelming amount of impressions.

While citizens of small towns rely on their gemüt and act upon emotional sentiment, „the type of city slickers – who of course are surrounded by a thousand individual modifications – manage to create an organ to protect themselves from the flows and discrepancies of their outer milieu: instead of reacting upon gemüt they react upon reason, which is gaining mental pre-rogative by augmenting consciousness [...]; this way the reaction to those phenomena is being transferred to the least sensitive [...] psychical organ"[6]: the intellect. Only a desensitization of perception and a factual view can ensure the coping with life in modern cities – its procedures are too complicated for an in-depth, case-by-case perception. With this intellectual view on their environment, as described by Simmel, people allow each other the development of more individuality that would hardly find acceptance among smaller networks or small towns.

Simmel also sees a strong connection to the fact that the trade of commodities is based on their monetary value instead of their qualitative value – which causes a calculating acquaintance with manufactures. As big cities form the core for monetary trade

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[5] **Simmel (1903).**
[6] **Simmel (1903).**

this is where quantitative evaluation also takes effect on inter-personal sight. Objects alike people are treated with dispassion; the desensitized intellect hardly recognizes anything peculiar about individuality and therefore doesn't object it. While in the small town the relationship between producer and customer is personal by nature, manufacturer and consumer are disconnected in the metropolitan environment; „the modern metropolis [...] is nourished almost entirely by market-determined production, a production for completely unknown customers who never appear face-to-face to the actual producer"[7]. This anonymity of the customer requires a highly standardized form of production – which in the end generates a stronger desire for individuality.

Pierre Lévy describes how worldwide communication and cultural exchange through the Web result in a *cosmopedia*[8] based on its collective intelligence: „Not only does the cosmopedia make available to the collective intellect all of the pertinent knowledge available to it at a given moment, but it also serves as a site of collective discussion, negotiation, and development..."[9] If we project the human intellect the way Simmel describes it as dependent on a metropolitan environment onto Lévy's model of the cosmopedia where the intellect is globally shared, its citizens' desire for individualization is being amplified to a whole new extend.

2. Postmodern strategies for mass production

As industrialization set the cornerstone for mass production, a trend of standardization and routine appeared within modern production. 1913/14 Henry Ford introduced the assembly line, where workers and machines each complete only one individual production step and then just pass on the item, creating a steady

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[7] *Simmel (1903).*
[8] *Lévy/ Bononno (1997).*
[9] *Lévy/ Bononno (1997).*

work flow and thus increasing productiveness. Templates are created as samples, so that the exact same exemplar can be reproduced endlessly; the more detailed the uniformity the lower the manufacture cost per item. If one unit appears to be defective, only this one production step is affected; since they are isolated form each other, units can be replaced, removed or improved without affecting the manufacture as a whole. The individual production steps can be kept simple so that anybody can fill in to perform them – or, the procedure can constantly become more specialized since its executer is concentrating only on his/her very task.

This model means a decentralized form of production; instead of having one instance responsible for the whole production – for example a cabinetmaker who is producing for an individual customer – a system of segmented labor is assembling the final product. The production reaches a faster paste yet targets an anonymous customer as described by Simmel. This kind of mass production suddenly made all kinds of commodities accessible and even affordable to the public, which was the core of society's modern spirit. In the same way huge amounts of the same goods were produced, „it seemed logical to manufacturers to use media vehicles to mass-produce customers in the same way that the factories mass-produced the merchandise"[10].

Soon the public was saturated with goods through mass production and when the automobile industry stagnated during the 1970s and car companies started selling to a sacrifice, one manufacturer remained successful in drawing profit: Toyota. Due to an alternative production strategy – the entire automobile industry as well as other big manufacturers of all types of goods had adopted to the production principles of fordism – Toyota managed to remain profitable. Instead of adopting Ford's model where distribution and sales came after production, Toyota made its production dependent on the sales: producing *on demand*. Orienting the manufacture towards the consumers' request,

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[10] *Turow (2005) 108.*

Toyota not only prevented from surplus production but could also save gratuitous storage costs, drawing necessary parts for production *just-in-time*. This requires much more flexible structures and the corresponding gathering of feedback, however, it turned out as a necessary element of mass production which at some point would always cause an oversaturated clientele.

„The basic change at work was product differentiation. Economies of scale were now allowing manufacturers to create slightly different versions of the same products to aim at different parts of the marketplace."[11] Audience segmentation became more rewarding than just targeting *everybody*; „today's markets are buyers' markets opposed to – as successfully practiced over decades – sellers' markets. Only through customer-oriented products, customer-oriented production, and customer-oriented service businesses can stand their ground. Customer-oriented, flexible production means quickly reacting to customers' wishes, offering the right product at the right moment of the right quality, being able to deliver to the right place."[12]

3. Modularity and mass production

As it became crucial to pay attention to the customers' demand, the industries have developed strategies to satisfy the oversaturated customers and their desire for uniqueness while still keeping the efficiency of mass production. Through modularity of the separate components, manufacturers can offer their customers a limited yet flexible system of personalization, which is supposed to communicate the possibility for individuality and thus lower the degree of saturation. Consumers have the option to customize an item in a way that expresses their own uniqueness – by combining the preferred components to an individual furnishing. „In a world of rationalized mass production personalized solutions are

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[11] *Turow (2005) 109.*
[12] *Mählck / Panskus (1995).*

supposed to allow one to receive something special, exclusively custom-made for him or her. The wish for consideration of one's personal needs isn't only being adopted by the consumer, it is really being demanded. Individual needs have emerged as new quality features in an industry still determined by mass production"[13].

Nike, for instance, adopted this idea by introducing *Nike iD,* the personalization of apparel and shoes: the customer can combine colors of the individual elements and even add a customized writing to the product. The production principal remains the same, but instead of selling pairs of white, red, black and blue sneakers Nike allows the customer to combine for instance the sole of the red, the lining of the white, and the laces of the blue edition. Standardization affects less the product as a whole than only the individual components. The additional writing generates an artificial relationship between consumer and customized product: up to eight letters can be added per shoe, allowing the customer to put e.g. one's name or player number. With this simple feature Nike tries to bridge the anonymity of mass production – while keeping its standards. The customer's saturation with standardized products is also being reduced by offering „special", „individual" items. These are main features of a postmodern production strategy which can be called post-fordism. Nowadays almost all goods – commodities, services, or software – allow a certain degree of personalization which, as Marco Tannert explains, clearly doesn't only serve the consumer.

4. Personalization as feedback

A second and much more important function of personalization – besides quenching the desire for more individuality caused by the effects of mass production – is the function as a channel for feedback. Not only for production but also for advertisement

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[13] **Tannert (2005) 8.**

feedback is a crucial issue. It is well known that print, broadcast, and online media firms draw their main revenue through selling audiences to advertisers; media analysts reckon the commodification of audiences to be substantial for media-advertiser relations. In order to be able to offer to advertisers the audiences they want and to consumers the products they demand the gathering of personal and lifestyle information is essential. Joseph Turow illustrates how media firms and marketers have been constructing audiences in order to define certain target groups.

Driven by the need to express their individuality, consumers are willing to provide important information about themselves. Personalization implies a persona: a profile is set up to store all data about the customer and keep track of his/her consumerism. Either the consumer provides the information him/herself or a profile is derived from documented behavior which is associated with either name, a phone number, screen name, customer number, or any other identification – Marco Tannert divides these into *explicit participant profiles* and *derived profiles*[14]. Camouflaged as a service personalization is usually perceived as a tool to allow individual costumer treatment. For the consumers this means the promise of compensation of their anonymity in the world of mass production – which is why they are mostly willing to provide their information themselves, through an explicit participant profile. According to Alan Westin, 58 percent of the American society are „privacy pragmatists"[15], meaning that consumers are willing to provide personal and lifestyle information if they personally benefit from doing so. This knowledge about the consumers' cost-benefit calculation motivates firms to cultivate the consumers' trust so that tracking down information about their behavior doesn't seem inappropriate.

The core value consists of the actual feedback potential of profiles, customizables, and personalization. By inserting information about age, sex, profession or similar demographic

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[14] *Tannert (2005) 58.*
[15] *Westin (2003).*

details clients enable companies to draw statistics based on those profiles. This is crucial for any intelligence about consumer groups and on-demand production as well as the base for canalized advertisement. Especially the culture industry uses this strategy to increase gain; by targeting customers that share similar interests with the same advertisement.

By the late 1970s product differentiation was pushed by an increasing competition, allowing smaller numbers of individual products to be manufactured for certain segments of society, as mentioned before. With a differentiated offering it became more and more important to learn „as much as possible about the social and social-psychological attributes that drive consumer activities [...] for placing them into audience groupings made of people with similar buying interests and abilities as well as media habits."[16]

Not only because of increasing competition broadcast media firms started to divide their outlets into multiple differentiated channels: as it became crucial to know as much as possible about consumers' activity and behavior the audience was divided into segments as well. This also enabled the creating of a relationship-oriented marketing which tries to emotionally tie consumers to a brand and getting them to develop trust in it, promising a rewarded of being treated as special.

Target-oriented media firms can offer less broad yet homogeneous audiences to advertisers who thus have the possibility to pay only for audiences they want. The result can be seen in today's vast choice of TV and radio channels.

Since the media landscape of today's *society of the spectacle* as Debort described it is oversaturated with impressions and advertisement, the consumers' attention is becoming more scarce and therefore more precious. When the attention received from the potential customer is decreasing, the advertiser needs to increasingly promote only products that are of interest to the consumer – or at least in the appropriate way. Michael Goldhaber

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[16] *Turow (2005) 110.*

even speaks about an emerging attention economy which is „radically different from any prior economy, and certainly from the industrial market economy. In its pure form, it doesn't involve any sort of money, nor a market or anything closely resembling one. It involves a quite different pattern of life than the routine-based, industrial one with its work/home, work/ play and production/consumption dichotomies. What matters is seeking, obtaining and paying attention."[17] Wasting the consumers' limited attention by targeting them with the wrong ad would mean losing the audience for advertising – today everyone is used to easily filtering and ignoring any sensory stimulus created by media and selectively recognizing only what's of interest.

Through personalization not only the consumer's attention is guaranteed through participation (setting up profiles, customizing products etc.) but also the consumer's interests can be observed and included in further production and promotion. As advertisement is personalized a more sophisticated, differentiated mainstream is made possible by these features. In the United States, for example, there is a determinable increase of locally inserted advertisements on TV; instead of targeting a national audience the slots for commercial breaks are filled with ads from local vendors, assuming them to be more accurate and adequate. This means that not only production but also advertisement is modular: personalized segments – in this case based on the geographical information provided by digital television – are inserted in their designated spot within mass media. Other examples for this strategy are Amazon.com or the Apple iTunes Music Store with their recommendation systems: „*customers who bought this item also bought...*" In other words, personalization is a crucial element of post-fordism production strategies. Looking at today's Web, are there any parallels we could draw to these industrial developments?

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[17] **Goldhaber (1997).**

II. **WEB 2.0:** FEATURES, EFFECTS, AND HISTORY

1. Characteristics

Several factors distinguish today's web from its earlier appearance, however, there are diverse points of view about what draws the main distinction between the Web 2.0 and its „first version".

Engaged designers love to point out the *rich user experience*[18] which is being achieved by professional looking, user-friendly sites. Their clear structures, intuitive navigation, and high compatibility to all browsers and displaying devices is being reflected aesthetically through a style coined by round edges, soft color fadings, 3-d shadows, an array of hi-fi buttons, bubbles, and clouds. This design trend derived from a new attitude towards the treatment of users, which considers their expectations about function and usability of websites and regards them as competent and respectable. Transparent structuring and intuitive navigation comfort the user who is supposed to feel in charge of what is being viewed – opposed to an earlier form featuring tricky navigation, pop-up ads, and *dialers* that made the user feel exploited.

Of course developers go farther and tend to emphasize on the broad range of free web applications that run inside your browser window instead of your desktop. Tim O'Reilly refers to this as the next generation of software[19]: Instead of having to buy packaged software and installing it on the desktop the user can access free services that are automatically updated regularly. Some examples of such services are the hosting and organizing of digital photos as offered by Flickr or Photobucket, online video editing as offered by Jumpcut, or the widely spread search engines Yahoo! and Google with their additional applications (Google

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[18] *O'Reilly (2005).*
[19] *O'Reilly (2005).*

Maps). Since the Web itself is used as the platform there are few compatibility problems; AJAX, short for Asynchronous JavaScript and XML is the common technique for creating such web applications which is supported by all popular browsers. Instead of having to reload a page every time the user activates a function provided by the application, AJAX allows the exchange of small amounts of data with the server „behind the scenes", without the user noticing. This suggests a more direct form of interaction and increases usability, speed, and response of such sites, significantly adding to the „*rich user experience*".

Also of interest in this context is the *mash-up*, another buzzword related to web applications, which is technologically based on the fact that the application programming interfaces (short: APIs), meaning the source code, of some web applications are freely accessible. A mash-up is the combination of different APIs in order to create a new application as, for instance, Flickr Maps, the combination of Flickr and Google Maps into a tool for displaying the location where photos were taken (which has later been adopted by Flickr as a standard function).

One could also point out the *social web* as its main characteristic, regarding the fact that most major Web2.0 services are incorporating their users as the core resource. Wether you look at media hosting services such as YouTube or Flickr where users upload and share their video clips or photographs, or Wikipedia where users voluntarily write and collect articles for a giant collective pool of knowledge, without the participation of millions of users these websites wouldn't be able to offer such an enormous collection of content.

Social networking sites such as MySpace, Friendster, or Facebook most directly apply this concept by turning the members themselves into the offering: after having set up a user profile, one can browse and contact people who use the same social networking service, adding them as „contacts" or „friends", and post comments on each other's pin board or „wall". Depending on the service a profile can host all kind of information as well as photo, video and music uploaded by its user. There are

all kinds of target groups; Facebook is intended to link school buddies, MySpace was designed as a platform for musicians, and because of their free and easy set-up such profiles are commonly used as personal home pages. Due to the popularity of such social networks, services such as YouTube have also added functions like setting up personal profile pages and adding each other as „friends".

The social Web basically describes a system of providing free framework and storing data on one side and the participation of users filling the collective information pool with content on the other side as the actual offering – a system which can be called „crowd-sourcing", while the effort and value of users uploading content appears much higher than the services gathering it.

What these factors, the revised treatment of users with coherent design structures, the wide range of free web applications and the incorporation of users as a main resource result in is what O'Reilly calls the „Web as platform"[20]. Instead of primarily perceiving and consuming content the user is using the Web as a tool for any kind of operation, from publishing content to aggregating feeds, from online video editing to sharing music, and thus being integrated into the process of cultural production.

2. Blogs, templates and feeds

The effect of the user attaining a significant role in producing content using the Web became apparent with the advent of blogging, where anybody with access to the Internet was suddenly able to globally publish and distribute content for free and without having to know anything about creating websites. A blog (short for weblog) is a chronologically organized journal that can be updated very easily and where each entry has an own addressable url (a so-called *permalink*), making it possible to link, share and discuss its

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[20] **O'Reilly (2005).**

content. „Blogs are the replacement for hompages of the 90s. They feature a mix of private and public content, they are online diary at the same time as publicity for one's self.“[21]

Most blogs are personal journals and diaries, however, many blogs have gained significance through their news coverage and commentatorship. „Partly, blogs are used for publishing eye-witness news. On the 16th of July 2003, US-blogger Andy Baio de-scribed an accident which had taken place in front of his window and had killed 10 people. His report was on the Internet before the first camera crews had even arrived.“[22] Another very common us-age is collecting links to extraordinary sites that one discovered, posting and discussing them in a blog.

LiveJournal, Blogger, TypePad, and many other blog host-ing services offer the free set-up of a personal account and a selection of templates for standardized, professional web pages. In general, templates are not only essential for the mass production of personal websites but fundamental for any kind of computer-aided production. Wether you're looking at desktop applications for creating text, still and moving image, sound and music com-positions, or at the function patterns of operating systems, templates are commonly used as sample layouts and documents in order to allow a perspicuous interaction between human and computer for a simple and easy work flow. The approach of using templates for easily producing websites on a large scale could be compared to the production strategies of fordism where stand-ardization allows mass-production and makes commodities avail-able to a broad public, of course looking at it within its post-modern appearance.

During the first half of the 1990s websites were primarily static, programming skills were required for publishing content which situated a top-down hierarchy of production. The user's role was rather passive; more as an observer one could primarily consume content which was provided by relatively few privileged.

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[21] *Lovink (2006).*
[22] *Möller (2005) 132.*

Content was produced for an unknown, anonymous audience similar to the conditions of the modern market described by Simmel. Creating online content to one's own account meant having to deal with at least basic rules of HTML, which often lead to an amateurish approach of its usage. Yet at the same time the active examination with its basic structures fostered a creative exploration of possibilities and limits of producing online content, which shaped an unstable yet experimental and variegated Web.

A couple of web templates, example layout drafts, already existed back then (e.g. *Geocities*) and by the end of the 1990s they increasingly became a popular tool for making websites. „It was a web of amateurs soon to be washed away by dot.com ambitions, professional authoring tools and guidelines designed by usability experts"[23]. Despite the fact that the look of most templates used was rather poor and just as lo-fi, they strictly followed common design and usability standards and thus offered almost zero innovation compared to „home-made" sites.

An interesting aspect about templates, however, is the idea of separating content from the form of its presentation: while the user is in charge of the content that is being published, the provider of a template – in case of a blog the particular hosting service – is responsible for providing a clear and reliable form of presentation.

This idea has been widely adopted, especially in the common structuring of most websites with the combination of an HTML (hypertext mark-up language) file containing the source code for content, and a corresponding CSS (cascading style sheet) file containing information about the form in which the content is presented. The main advantage of this concept is the possibility of separately changing or updating the content or re-designing the look of a page without affecting one another. This enables the author of a blog, for instance, to easily add new entries, keeping the content dynamic and the site up-to-date – an essential characteristic of today's Web. *CSS Zen Garden* is a project that

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[23] **Lialina (2005).**

focusses on the possibilities provided by this combination of HTML and CSS and nicely demonstrates the direct effect of just changing the CSS of a page on its perception without changing the content.

Another technology based on the principle of separating content and presentation is RSS (really simple syndication), which allows users to subscribe to the „feed" of websites that support the format. While the main feature of blogs is their dynamic output and up-to-dateness, it is tiresome having to always check back manually on one's favorite blogs in order to get the latest information and news. By subscribing to its feed using a feed reader (some browsers also offer this function) the user is automatically notified when a new entry has been posted and can display the entry inside the feed reader (also called feed aggregator). In other words, not the user has to regularly visit websites that are of interest, but the newest entries of those websites automatically appear in one's feed reader window. Thanks to an XML (extensible markup language) file that carries the information of each individual entry the content is „machine-readable" and can be viewed by any kind of displaying device. The XML file doesn't contain any information about how the content is to be displayed, and so the content of a blog that supports RSS can be easily imported by a feed reader and displayed disregarding its actual look on the blog. By regularly checking the XML file that indexes the total amount of entries a feed reader automatically knows when there is new content that the user hasn't seen yet. A podcast which can be generally described as an audio (or also video) blog also uses this technology, making it possible to produce a series of audio or video content (e.g. music, radio dramas, video clips, TV series etc.) the audience can subscribe to in order to automatically get each episode as soon as it's released.

2.a Effects of involvement
Apart from the fact that they have widely substituted personal home pages because of their quick and easy set-up, their dynamic

content, and their up-to-dateness, blogs have demonstrated the effect of a participatory acquaintance with the Web. The foundation for a „digital democracy"[24] is the possibility to freely say what one thinks and the chance to be heard. Most of the online journals are amateurish and used for communicating very personal information, rather interesting to close friends or colleagues. Others are just collecting links that are of interest for a community without really creating anything themselves, as the collective blog *Slashdot*. But as mentioned before blogs have gained importance as subjective yet independent sources for news and commentary. Opposed to traditional journalism blogs aren't controlled by media companies that decide what makes it into the news; they are also less effected by censorship and offer an autonomous form of commentatorship. „Individual bloggers can reach tens or hundreds of thousands of readers at minimal cost – not least because of which blogs are mercilessly prosecuted by repressive regimes"[25].

In fact, with top attendances of millions of page views per day some blogs could be defined as mass media, apparently playing a major role in opinion making and thus exerting influence on the public. This has been seen multiple times at the awe-inspiring success of appeals for funds, as for example the raise of 40 million dollars for Howard Dean's campaign for his presidency[26], or at a political scandal, where due to bloggers like Josh Marshall an issue was brought to light that previously hadn't been discussed by the traditional media, forcing republican U.S. senator Trent Lott to resign[27]. Such kind of lobbying has demonstrated the power and influence private individuals are able to exert through the Web, and the masses that can be stirred into action. Theoretically every blog has the chance to evolve into a mass medium that is taken seriously; successful authors get the opportunity to write for the associated press, many have published

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[24] *Grossman (2006).*
[25] *Möller (2005) 153.*
[26] *Low (2004).*
[27] *Möller (2005) 134.*

books and earned money thanks to the hard work they've put into their blogs.

But as blogs gained popularity and importance they began to be misused and infiltrated increasingly. This has to be mentioned as it is less my personal valuation but a generally acknowledged fact. Wether it is the money offering of advertisers to blog authors wishing to benefit from the honest and credible reputation of blogs through surreptitious advertising, or the attempt to influence the reader's opinion making by posting fake comments under bogus names (so-called sock puppets), blogs do not seem to be resistant to misuse. Yet the fact that political parties hire bloggers to lobby for them indicates the importance blogs have gained among traditional media.

Compared to the effects of blogging one can just imagine what impact the „social Web" is leaving on the media landscape; Time Magazine couldn't help but to nominate *you* as the person of the year 2006; „we're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy,"[28] explains Lev Grossman. James Poniewozik speaks of a change of „the flow of information"[29]; without the long media lines through press agencies the news deliver insights „where TV couldn't or wouldn't [go] – running into air-raid shelters in the Israel-Hizballah war, crouching behind an armored vehicle with a soldier in Samarra, bullets dinging into metal off camera."[30] Due to the developments in mobile communication, portable photo and video cameras seem to be available whenever needed delivering eye-witness news all around the globe – not by reporters or professional paparazzi, but by private persons sharing their media. And because of their viral spreading in online communities and Web2.0 networks such videos have a

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[28] **Grossman (2006).**
[29] **Poniewozik (2006).**
[30] **Poniewozik (2006).**

much higher potential to reach a broad audience and thus influence public opinions than for example text blogs. One might claim republican U.S. senator George Allen lost the elections in november 2006 because of a video on YouTube that shows him making a racist statement, calling the person filming him „macaca"[31]. The video has been watched by hundreds of thousands of people sharing it with their friends and colleagues and virally spreading it all around the Web.

On top of that, with millions of participating users the Web moved from a medium simply displaying content to a platform that *creates* content, with the effects being cultural, scholastic, economic, and political. For instance, new social graces evolve, like the drift to publishing content in English (as I do, even though it is not my native tongue) aware of the international audience. Standards and formats of online media are often adopted by offline media, as for example typical Web2.0 aesthetics that can also be found in print media. Certain cultural phenomena initiated on the Web, as for example the widely spread home video clips of girls dancing and shaking their bottom to a certain type of music, recording it in their private living or bedroom with a webcam.

The Web seems to foster the interchange of cultural assets and an endless loop of produtcion; online communities have created a new level of expertise by appropriating, interpreting, and annotating cultural content and occupying a cultural competence that seeks comparison. The Web as a platform for creating content becomes most apparent when looking at projects where the sum of contributions results in a collective product.

2.b Collaborative production

The Web encyclopedia Wikipedia is a good example for the fruit of collaborative production: ever since it started in 2001 the project has gathered millions of articles written by users voluntarily

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[31] *Poniewozik (2006).*

making it as accurate as the *Encyclopædia Britannica*[32] in numerous fields. Due to its open structure, anybody with access to the Internet can contribute and edit articles.

The name Wikipedia is a mix of the two words encyclopedia and Wiki. A Wiki is an open website designed to enable multiple authors to contribute to its content; Wikipedia is listed as the biggest Wiki on the Web[33]. There are different versions for several languages such as English, German, Japanese, French, Polish, Swedish, Dutch, Spanish, Danish, Italian, even Esperanto, and many more, with English being the one with the most entries. More about the technical and historical background of Wikis in general, and Wikipedia in particular as well as suggestions for improvement can be found in Erik Möller's „Die heimliche Medienrevolution". What is astonishing about Wikipedia apart from its accuracy proved by independent studies is again the phenomenon of participation. Without getting financially rewarded the motivation for users to spend hours of work writing and updating articles seems to be of ideological nature. Along with the Open Source movement and the Creative Commons principle Wikipedia is based on a strong community of users who gather information and knowledge which results in sort of a collective intellect. Such grassroots formations aren't just a recent feature of the Web2.0 – the early Web was mainly used to elaborate and share knowledge (as for example the *Usenet*) – yet never before the dimensions of collaborative production have seemed this vast.

Again, an open system such as a Wiki is susceptible to misuse and sheer vandalism. Celebrities have falsely been announced dead[34], edit-wars have been fought where two users disagree on the correctness of an article and switch back and forth between their versions, and a large amount of articles lack objectivity or are partly incorrect. But the project has made an example

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[32] **Giles (2005).**
[33] **Möller (2005) 169.**
[34] **Meusers (2007).**

of the potentials the Web offers for collective production, when nobody expected it to work this well.

Web services are trying to utilize this social momentum by providing the facilities for any types of collectives; crowd-sourcing has become a main strategy in Web2.0. Google, for instance, asks its users to help tagging pictures in order to improve its image search; random pictures are shown to users who are asked to type in keywords to describe what is being seen. There is no reward for this task besides gaining points as in a game, basically the user is asked for a favor by the service while being reminded that it's to one's own benefit (see http://images.google.com/imagelabeler). Practically, crowd-sourcing has proved to be an effective strategy; user participation can be easily stimulated and is a free source for content.

3. Individuality as the motive

Georg Simmel stated that people tend to feel the urge to stand out of the mass the more standardized and anonymous the structures around them; living in a big city means cultivating a less personal contact among citizens and tolerating each others' individuality. The result is a rational intellect upon which a person perceives its surroundings without getting irritated by unusual impressions, and the freedom to both develop and express an own individual personality.

If we apply this argumentation onto the Web, especially what people call Web2.0, we may find that worldwide social contact and communication outline an advanced version of Simmel's metropolis. If we presumed that basic online communication is anonymous then a personal profile is the user's way to express one's individuality. In order to stand out of the mass of people on the Web – a mass much bigger than the number of people one would be able to meet in a city – users seem to express their individuality for instance through elaborated layouts of their MySpace profiles. Personal information is provided voluntarily,

furthermore one's interests and tastes are openly exhibited. Cultural signs are accumulated, profiles are used to compile music, photo and video; one's personality ought to be summed up by an online representation.

What appears grotesque – despite the fact that such profiles are provided as templates and the degree of customization and therefore the facility for self-expression depends on the service – is that the users who are trying to express their uniqueness and individuality at the same time contribute to a collective instance: the main asset of social networks besides offering the tools for personal websites is their database, the social pool of users. One can not only set up an own account and profile but also browse through millions of other people's profiles. The networking service as a whole results in a social repository and work of reference; the individual contributions add the value to the whole.

Nevertheless, the motivation for individual users to fill the pool of information seems to be the need to express one's personality and uniqueness and not as in the case of Wikipedia or the Open Source movement the latitudinarian nobility of ideals.

Media firms seem to react to this demand by offering personalized solutions. The focus lies on the individual: the „i" in iTunes[35], the „my" in MySpace, the „you" in YouTube, or the „we" in Wii (emphasizing the option of multiple individuals playing together). What I find interesting is the fact that the shape of the „i" appears similar to the general design of icons representing the user: a neutral figure which on one hand could apply to almost anybody but on the other hand expresses personalization and individuality. So in the context of Web2.0 media the „i" can be seen as a symbol for the subject (the user) in the contradictory system of realizing one's individuality in order to contribute to a collective system.

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[35] *The „i" in Apple products initially stood for „internet", but has generally been adopted as an emphasis on personalization (as in iGoogle). The letter can be interpreted as the first person, I, or the abbreviation of individuality or identity.*

4. As we may (still) think: Memex, Xanadu, Web2.0

1945 Vannevar Bush, former Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development and the president's leading consultant for sciences, published his paper „As We May Think" envisioning an associative system to store knowledge and augment human memory: instead of indexing information into numeric and alphabetical order and categorizing content into topics that are to be searched over and over, Bush described a method for storing content in a similar way the human brain functions. „With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain."[36] Instead of the content existing only once and only inside its categorical class (or having to duplicate it) there are to be associative trails that allow multiple classification for each piece of information. Content can be annotated and linked together, forming trails created by users which can be shared and passed on; a dynamic categorization similar to the grassroots structure of the human brain with infinite possible connections is the result. Multiple items can be viewed at once and passages of different documents linked together, while machine-readable annotations can be added and relevant items suggested for further research.

Bush's vision of an apparatus he called the „Memex" was based on contemporary cutting-edge technologies like microfilm or his predicted „dry photography" which he thought to be perfect mediums for compressing and editing a large amount data. Early computers did exist to that time, yet Bush looked at them exclusively as number crunchers. With the emergence of digital computing his vision was never put into practice.

In the 1960s Ted Nelson, famous for coining common terms such as *hypertext*, initiated his project Xanadu. Based on the concept of the Memex (he released a text called „As We Will Think",

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[36] **Bush (1945).**

the title referring to Bush's text) Nelson imagined a decentralized network of connected computers for storing documents, similar to the World Wide Web that later was developed by Tim Berners-Lee. Nelson who is still working on Xanadu claims that „computers have been carefully made to simulate paper and hierarchy, and we are so used to these traditions that we consider them true and natural, ordinary and appropriate. But they are artificial constructs carefully created, and I believe they are the wrong constructs."[37] The Web also follows this principle, trying to imitate paper through its structure of pages.

Unlike the WWW Xanadu is to feature unbreakable links (meaning that no hyperlink can ever point to a non-existing page), copyright simplification and softening through a simple system of permission and quotation, origin connection which ensures that all quotations are always linked to their original, two-way hyperlinks that show all links pointing to the site which is viewed, intercomparison of connected documents showing differences between versions, deep version management meaning that throughout the process of development a document can be viewed and compared in every status, and incremental publishing which ensures that a continuing development does not effect a link to the document[38]. In other words Nelson envisioned a global database storing documents which couldn't be erased; new versions could be published yet the old version of the same document would stay available making it possible to easily compare different versions. Already developing solutions to problems that hadn't even been realized at that time like copyright violation in the digital age, Nelson created a concept superior to the far more primitive WWW. Not only financial and organizational problems but also the technical requirements have kept Xanadu and its results solely theoretical – like Bush's Memex a hypothetical system that has never been realized.

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[37] **Nelson (2001 a).**
[38] **Nelson (2001 b).**

5. Folksonomy and tags

Though, sixty years after Bush's vision of the *Memex*, and after 40 years of Nelson's work on his hypothetical system Xanadu some of their features have almost become manifest in recent technologies of the Web: we have looked at Wikis as a system that enables collaborative production of online content, and their version management is similar to some aspects of Nelson's Xanadu. It is possible to publish incrementally without effecting a link and compare different versions and work steps.

The idea of a user-generated categorization of the Memex for instance is reflected in today's tagging of content; with the user creating personal indexes to documents and media files, a dynamic taxonomy is used to classify content on the web. Multiple keywords are attributed to individual items by author and users, explaining their topic matter in order to make the items searchable and to find similar items that deal with the same subject. Because of its collective principle such user-generated taxonomy is called *folksonomy*; free services like Digg, Del.icio.us, or Google's Web History enable users to bookmark websites and annotate them, adding a short description and tags to categorize them. This way the user can collect and share thousands of bookmarks of interesting websites categorizing them in a personal way and browse other users' bookmarks according to interesting tags. Combining several tags in a search could be compared to the Memex' structure of infinite possible trails. The system of tagging content is somewhat isomorphic to the human associative categorization translated into a format readable to the computer which can thus connect websites, blog posts and media according to their context; this is how the WWW is transforming into what people call the semantic web.

Most Web2.0 media hosting services like Flickr and YouTube offer the tagging of content in order to enable the user to filter the enormous amount of content which is being uploaded by users every day. As mentioned before with the required effort for publishing content being extremely low (due to free, user-friendly

Web2.0 services) the amount of content is explosively growing as the quality becomes increasingly lo-fi and amateurish. „That decreased signal-to-noise ratio means that filters – search tools, recommendation engines, rss feeds – become increasingly important to us as a society, and so it's crucial that we have a public discussion about who designs those tools and what values are encoded in them."[39] The tagging of content seems to be a democratic filter for categorization, yet it is often offered as a function within and limited to individual services.

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[39] **Johnson (2006).**

III. MIGHTY MARKETING:
AUDIENCE ECONOMICS

1. Web2.0 as a feedback channel

We have looked at production and advertising strategies of post-fordism earlier and found that personalization is a crucial aspect for collecting consumer information; the segmentation and canalizing of audiences into homogeneous consumer groups proved to be more profitable yet requires a much more reliable and detailed system of feedback. Usually details about personal interests and behavior are derived and inserted into profiles making it possible to target potential customers with the „right" advertisement since their attention is limited. Offered as a service, personalization motivates the consumer to voluntarily provide information about personal affectations him/herself. Explicit user profiles are set up by consumers willing to provide information about their demographic such as age, sex, nationality, income, and interests expecting to be rewarded in some way; tracking down personal and behavioral information is not seen as privacy invasion but as two-way relationships of media and consumer.

The social web is all about user profiles; any Web2.0 service offers the free and easy set-up of a personal profile, which is primarily seen as a chance to express one's individuality and to make the anonymous Web more personal. In his text „Audience Construction and Culture Production: Marketing Surveillance in the Digital Age" Joseph Turow describes how newspaper and magazine publishers „realized that they could make most of their profits from advertisers by charging low subscription rates to garner the huge numbers of readers advertisers wanted"[40]. Philip M. Napoli mentions how „it is widely believed that Blockbuster Video's most valuable asset is not its facilities or video and DVD library but its database of customer demographic data and video

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[40] *Turow (2005) 104.*

rental histories. Such data have become increasingly vital in the Internet context [...]. As a result the media environment of the future probably will be one in which media organizations increasingly will seek ways to gather and charge for the personal data of the audiences that they attract."[41] Could this also be the reason why most Web2.0 services are free?

Unlike television and radio where quotas about the audience can only be roughly estimated the WWW delivers exact numbers of viewers as well as details about their behavior through click streams and page view statistics. Furthermore the detailed information users are voluntarily inserting in their profiles allow a very differentiated segmentation of an overall audience. Especially categories like nationality, sex and age, where the user chooses from default answers, are definite and require no abstraction or interpretation. It seems important information since it is required for setting up a user account at a social networking or content hosting site. Among each other users could find alternative ways to determine one's sex – by looking at the user's avatar or photos, screen name et cetera. You could argue that providing the user's age is required due to legal regulations, however, the user agreeing to the general terms and conditions should be enough. In addition a legal disclaimer could be used noting that the user must be over a certain age to participate, including the typical „enter, I agree" button.

But there must be a special value in the user providing unambiguous information about her/himself, making it essential to provide this information for signing up. Of course there is always a dark figure of users who provide the wrong information on purpose, let's say men who pretend they are females or the very common *age play* which allows users to fake their age and identity to act out their fantasies; but since personalization is offered as a service users tend to provide information that is correct at least to some extend.

When looking at recent censorship issues around the popular image hosting service Flickr the relationship between media

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[41] **Napoli (2003) 178.**

firms and users becomes evident; Flickr has disabled images that have not been flagged as „safe" for users in Germany, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea. Users of these countries cannot turn the safe search function off due to the Terms of Service. Flickr authorities didn't announce these grave changes nor gave reasons for them, upsetting their community of users. Many users who have paid for a premium membership, a *pro* account, are angry because Flickr doesn't seem to search for a solution to the problem or apologizes for it. (A solution would be considering pro users' credit card information as a proof of being 18 or older, since this is the required age for credit card holders in Germany.) Instead, Flickr censors its users' protest, removing images that display slogans like „Think Flickr, Think!" and „Against Censorship". Regardless of the reasons for these changes of functionality, this clearly shows that the aim is not to please the users; their needs and views are ignored instead of being acknowledged even though it is the users who give the service its value.

Such services are mostly free – a fact that could be compared to the low subscription fees of magazines as mentioned by Turow. This would mean that the main source of revenue isn't about selling a *pro account* with unlimited upload space to users the way Flickr for instance does, but about selling audiences to advertisers. „Advertisers seek specific characteristics in the audiences that they try to reach: age, gender, income, and a host of other distinguishing factors"[42]. Naturally the relationship between media firms and marketers is „fraught with tensions"[43] due to the clash of interests, with both sides hiring market research institutes to find justification for raising rates or demanding popular-priced fees. As mentioned earlier unlike traditional media the Web delivers exact numbers about its audiences.

In fact the Web2.0 allows the highest possible degree of segmenting its audience: each individual user is also a potential producer of content, a media outlet. Thanks to the tagging of user-

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[42] *Napoli (2003) 16.*
[43] *Turow (2005) 104.*

generated content, the folksonomy, this unlimited amount of channels can be searched and its content dynamically organized – comparable to the Memex' system of trails – enabling audiences to shift without losing track of them. Yet this has to happen within each service, the folksonomy rarely functions across platforms (as on Del.icio.us which is a pure bookmarking and tagging service). More than traditional broadcast media firms splintering their audience into narrow yet differentiated target groups, Web2.0 firms can segment their audience into the smallest possible unit, the individual user, potentially without crumbling the effectiveness – thanks to the thorough system of feedback and the computer-readable folksonomy.

1.a The Long Tail

Chris Anderson talks about „The Long Tail" which generally describes the total sum of less popular products holding more selling power than the sum of the few market leading blockbusters (see *fig. 1*). The term refers to a graph displaying industry statistics with a high-amplitude popularity of few products, so-called bestsellers or hits, followed by a very broad low-amplitude popularity of niche or „underground" products. As Anderson mentions even though the sum of The Long Tail often takes up just as much or even more than the popularity of the short head (the sum of hits) it has been ignored for a long time. Due to bottle-necks in distribution and costly logistic efforts traditional bricks-and-mortar bookstores for instance mostly offer popular books since the space for shelves is too expensive to waste it on niche products.

With virtual stores such as Amazon or iTunes the selling power of The Long Tail has finally become lucrative; the mainstream no longer concentrates on marketing hits and blockbusters, instead the possibilities regarding logistics provided by the Web2.0 offer an even more consequent realization of postfordism production and marketing strategies. „When consumers are offered infinite choice, the true shape of demand is revealed. And it turns out to be less hit-centric than we thought. People gravitate towards niches because they satisfy narrow interests

better, and in one aspect of our life or another we all have some narrow interest (whether we think of it that way or not)."[44]

y

Head

Long Tail

x

x = products; y = popularity
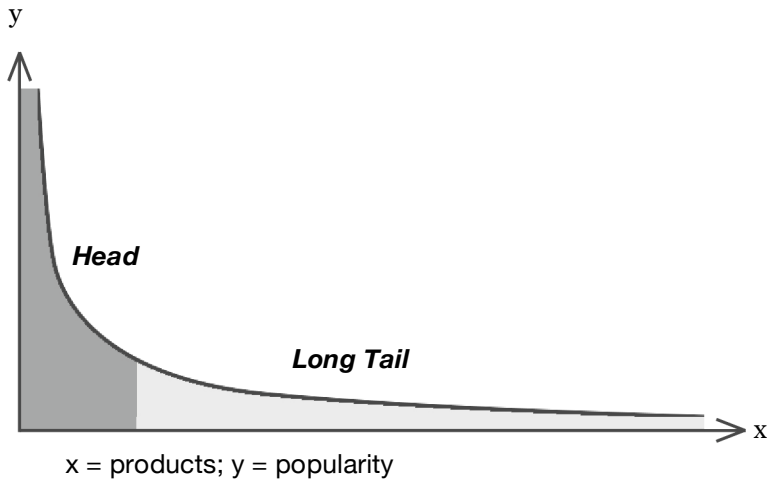
fig. 1: graph displaying *The Long Tail*.

Google found a way to tap into The Long Tail with its *AdSense* system, an automated ad serving program to place advertisements on websites. Owners of websites can sign up in order to earn money through ads on their site; Google uses its search engine algorithms to place the „right" ads according to the content of the site. If you allowed Google to place ads on your blog about model airplanes it would for instance automatically display offerings for flying lessons or online distributers of toys due to the keywords in your text. The geologic information of the user viewing the site is also considered so that someone visiting the site from Germany would see German ads while people from the U.S. would see ads taken out by American advertisers. Every time a user clicks on an ad the owner of the website displaying the ads re-

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[44] **Anderson (without year).**

ceives a micropayment – every time the sum of micropayments has reached US$ 100 Google transfers the money to the website owner's bank account. Like this even less popular sites have the chance to make money through advertisements on their page; in case nobody clicks on them, no money is paid.

This way advertisers using Google's *AdWords*, the corresponding service to take out ads, only pay for „successful" audience disposal. The service is very popular because of the standardized and simple appearance as well as the contextual relevance of ads to the website contents. The easy set-up and automatized distribution of ads turns it into a hands-on method for online advertising.

But what really makes Google AdSense special is its way of effectively trading with minor audience groups same as with consumers viewing popular content. Also, besides the earnings made through the commission of advertisers' micropayments to audience sellers, Google withholds money already paid by advertisers yet not reached the $100 barrier for paying off audience sellers – many of which run less popular sites that take relatively long to collect as much AdSense revenue as $100 (several months if not even years). This means Google has investment money at it's hands which actually belongs to people using AdSense, as much as 379 million according to their fiscal year 2006 results[45].

1.b Audience autonomy

Another side effect of fragmenting audiences and media environments is the increased „audience autonomy [as used by Philip M. Napoli the term does *not* refer to the degree to which audience members can interpret the content they consume – *note by D.K.*]"[46]. With a broader range of media outlets to choose from and the technology to switch between them – e.g. remote control for TV, browser for the Web – the consumer doesn't depend on airtime but can compile his own mix of media content. Further-

[45] **c.f. http://investor.google.com/releases/2006Q4.html**
[46] **Napoli (2003) 135.**

more technologies like RSS enable the consumer to decide what, when, and how to consume media products. „Thus the new media environment is one in which audience members increasingly are able to seek out the content that interests them, when they are interested in consuming it, using the technology that they prefer, rather than being *programmed at* by media organizations and able to access certain content only at certain times and with certain technologies.“[47]

If the production strategies of traditional broadcast media such as television and radio as well as the Web of the 1990s could be compared to the principles of fordism with its anonymous end consumer, then Web2.0 and its focus on personalized media consumption and its asynchronous form would apply Toyota's principle of on-demand distribution. Phenomena like the lucrative Long Tail and the on-demand printing of custom requested content (like T-shirts by Cafepress or Spreadshirt) remind of the transformation from fordism to toyotism as mentioned in chapter one. This, however, is my personal impression, but it would explain the requirement of reliable sources for consumer feedback as a characteristic of postmodern production strategies.

2. Invisible borders

The utter transformation of the Web into an apex of media and audience fragmentation requires it to feature an effective function for searching and filtering its content. The folksonomy of tagging user-generated content with keywords is essential for the autonomous audience to find what is of interest since the content is only hosted, not produced by media firms.

Generally the „open“ character of the Web leaves a positive impression; the user being involved in culture production and the folksonomy are key aspects for people to call Web2.0 the new

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[47] **Napoli (2003) 135.**

digital democracy. The grasped audience autonomy and participation seem to give the user overarching control over the Web.

What appears strange is the self-referential character of the typical Web2.0 services: the potential of the folksonomy is being provided only within their own system, you wouldn't get a video clip on YouTube as a result of searching for a certain keyword on Flickr. In general there's a strong interest in tying the user to single services. This approach is more obvious in online media firms creating „walled gardens"[48] in order to keep users navigating within their range of control. Such online environments offer multiple sections like information and news, communication, or commerce and try to discourage the user to leave.

Again, the user needs a profile for the personal customization of those environments which is presented as a service. The consumer is supposed to feel comfortable with personally interesting information displayed automatically and exclusive services offered for free. Users without an access to such an environment are openly being discriminated against, in order to generate the feeling of a *must-have.* The individual is supposed to feel it also deserves such services and thus sign up for it. Personally customized pages and special offerings are to encourage the user to provide details about personal interests as well as to discourage from leaving the environment. Only one login is required for all offered services, hoping at some point the consumer will be too lazy to remember several logins of different providers and thus stick to one. „Such customization allows the site to cultivate a relationship with its audience and to develop data about audience members' interests and movements that it can use for targeting ads."[49]

In other words, the fragmented media environment gives the user multiple options to consume and even to produce content, yet each company tries to offer as much of such sections itself in order to establish and keep an audience valuable for advert-

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[48] *Turow (2005) 116.*
[49] *Turow (2005) 116.*

isers. Typical examples for this approach are AOL, Google, Yahoo! which all offer multiple services and the customizable presentation of content.

The importance of such walled gardens is indicated through the fact that if there is a service that beats the popularity of one offered by a big firm, this service is just bought and incorporated into the walled garden at any cost – see Google buying YouTube (for $1.65 billion) disregarding their own video hosting service Google Video, Yahoo! buying the popular image hosting service Flickr and the bookmarking tool Del.icio.us (each for a rumored $30-35 million), News Corp buying MySpace for an estimated $580 million, Google buying Blogger, or CBS buying Last.fm for $280 million[50], even though all these services are „free“.

It has almost become a sport to establish a start-up featuring some useful or attractive service, making it as popular as possible and gathering as much valuable data about its users as possible, and then selling it to the big media moguls including the data about its audience. The big media firms compete in investing and speculating in the right services overbidding each other with vertiginous prices at acquisitions, trying not to miss an opportunity or being outperformed by their competitors' range of offerings. Some critics claim that this trend is leading to the next economic bubble because the money paid at such deals exceeds the actual value of those service sites by far. Others point out the fact that such dazzling amounts of money represent an exception, usually acquisitions achieve much less.

3. Templates as directives

The framework for profiles, blogs, as well as other sites for publishing content is called a web template; pre-defined layouts can be customized and filled with personal content without the

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[50] **Tristan Louis (2006).**

user having to know anything about the technical fundamentals. On one hand templates provide the useful framework for producing websites on the fly, on the other hand this means a bond to standards designed by the provider. Standardization is required for templates to allow the mass production of websites. Such standards can tell a lot about the concepts of how the user is supposed to behave.

YouTube for instance is a service for viewing and publishing video; the main focus lies on the video frame and on the suggested content similar or relevant to the currently viewed (see *fig. 2*). The description area for videos is relatively small and almost not noticeable, placed in the „boring" area top right of the page among information like the date when it was uploaded and the permalink url. The description is often abbreviated and the user has to click on „more" to view the full text. It is actually more noticeable what other users write as comments about a video than what the author has to say. (Note: as I am writing this text YouTube is currently testing its „NEW (beta) version" of the standard video page. The description text has moved from the box on the top right down below the video frame, making it slightly more viewable but still remarkably limited in space.) YouTube's success seems based on the viral nature of its users' videos, and by highlighting the community's reactions instead of the authors' statements YouTube is stressing the degree of infection. It also works as an invitation to comment on material which raises the question of how essential and precious user participation is. If the sheer clicking on an ad by Google means real money for the model of *AdWords* then leaving a comment or rating material could mean just as much on YouTube. This assumption would explain the tiny space designated to the author's description text: it is of no value in the sense of providing feedback, and allowing more space would mean giving away useful surface.

I also doubt that it is of any value wether a video gets rated „awesome!" or „poor"; the act of rating itself is what is important. By casting one's vote the user is confirming „I have seen this video and paid attention to it" why she or he is able to have an opinion

about it. The division into five rating stars could be to lure the user into participating in this system of feedback, supposing people enjoy expressing their own opinion. If you're too lazy to write a comment or not able to write in a certain language then you can still leave your opinion through the five star rating system.

In other words, the template reflects the way users are supposed to consume content; in this case perception of content is limited to a lowbrow manner, essential is that the users keep watching videos, jumping from one to the next while their feedback works as evaluation. The emphasis doesn't lie on communicating a deeper understanding of the content matter, a presumed laziness of the consumer makes video much more appealing than text. „Reading is a process which presumes a substantial intellectual activity and isn't learnable offhand. Essential is the direct ability to associate what is read with stored knowledge. Television, however, requires no further abilities besides language. With a minimum of mental activity a maximum of emotional reaction can be achieved"[51]. „TV has reduced discourse to photo ops and sound bites, asserting the hegemony of image over language, emotion over intellect."[52]

As mentioned earlier the circumstances of the metropolis described by Simmel require the citizen to develop an intellect in order to cope with the endless stream of impressions; I assume these circumstances to be amplified to a higher degree when applied onto the Web. If the rather primitive form of consuming video, however, requires only little intellectual activity then YouTube represents a small town environment within the Worldwide Web. Wether the offering of content which is easy to consume is the key to YouTube's success remains unclear; yet the conception and the layout of a sample video page seems to reflect this approach.

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[51] **Möller (2005) 49.**
[52] **Dery (2004).**

You Tube
Broadcast Yourself ™

Videos   Categories   Channels   Community   Upload

Search   powered by Google

Star Wars Kid - MK Workout

00:32 / 01:10

Try out the NEW (beta) version of this page!

Added: May 10, 2006
From: djchase72
Provided By: djchase72
DIRECTOR

Subscribe
to djchase72

Move over Billy Blanks, SWK is gonna ... (more)

Category Comedy
Tags: swk star wars kid (more)
URL   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-eOsUxC
Embed <object width="425" height="350"><param n

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Showing 1–20 of 29   See All Videos

Star Wars kid Drunken Jedi
00:54
From: fantom81z28
Views: 1035506

Star Wars Kid Matrix
00:38
From: mippymips
Views: 415433

Star Wars Kid
01:48
From: raze7ds
Views: 2082778

star wars kid- kill bill
01:24
From: TWisTChi
Views: 131193

Star Wars Kid Matrix Version
00:36
From: DayAmperzand
Views: 81318

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Director Videos

The Haunting
01:20
From: waverlyfilms

Conversations you will have a million times in your life
01:57
From: BenLoka

The Daniel Pearl Murder -- Part 3: The Capture
08:37
From: statevideo

Scootstars - Departure
03:24
From: pdrop

Login to rate
★★★★☆ 20
ratings

Save to Favorites   Share Video
Add to Groups   Post Video
Flag as Inappropriate

Views: 9,643   Comments: 16   Favorited: 26 times
Honors: 0   Links: 5

Comments & Responses

Post a video response
Post a text comment

Most Recent ... 1 2 ... Oldest

JuggyFWB (1 month ago)
You think it was really worth it for being made fun of literally "world wide", and being known as SWK for the rest of his life?
(Reply)

djchase72 (1 month ago)
The way Ghyslain became known as the 'SWK' is unfortunate, but most people would give an arm to get that kind of fame. Why do you think reality tv is popular?!

You can turn internet lemons like that into some profitable lemonade these days. Matt of 'Where The Hell is Matt' did the talk show circuit then got sponsored by Stride Gum.

"Blessed is he who has learned to laugh at himself, for he shall never cease to be entertained."
-John Powell
(Reply)

Clervis (1 month ago)
Or you could just sue your classmates for 275,000 big ones and win like he did.
(Reply)

HazeHand (2 months ago)
nice rmx, what's the second song ?
(Reply)

djchase72 (2 months ago)
The song is JC Chasez - Blowin' Me Up (With Her Love).
(Reply)

HazeHand (2 months ago)
ThX !
(Reply)

arn150 (2 months ago)
this is fukin brilliant
(Reply)

djchase72 (2 months ago)
Thanks!
(Reply)

ruthydoodles (3 months ago)
omg poor boy
(Reply)

ahda81 (5 months ago)
lmao
(Reply)

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Company Info   Terms of Use   Press   Blog
TestTube   Privacy Policy   Contact   Jobs

fig. 2: sample template of a video page on YouTube.

4. Strategies for presentation

Through standardized patterns the form of presentation also becomes indifferent, the focus seems to be only on the content provided by the user. The template appears to be neutral and ideal for appropriation while only a limited amount of customization (and costumization) is possible, often none at all. For instance, all Flickr photo pages or YouTube video pages look the same, only the pictures/videos submitted by the users are of interest.

This focus implies a strategy called „*immediacy*" described by David Bolter and Richard Grusin in „Remediation: Understanding New Media". While templates are considered windows to the actual content matter, the medium tries to blend in with the content itself. *Immediacy* describes a strategy of making the viewer forget the presence of a medium and instead feel as if the represented objects are actually present. The medium is supposed to become invisible just like the glass of a window which is being looked through.[53]

In this case the template for a photo page on Flickr is considered to be neutral – a point of view which is to be seen critical since the overall design and structure of templates can influence both the conception and the perception of content. Not only the standardized format (photos are being down-scaled for a better preview) but also the side information influences the perception: how many times was a picture viewed? How many people call it a *favorite*? Are there any comments and did it cause an interesting discussion? These are essential details that can define the perception of a photograph, which means the template itself is more than an invisible window to content.

Is it a secondary fact that besides the information mentioned above, Flickr also names the type and brand of the camera a photograph was taken with? When clicking the camera name a short list of item specifications as well as its price is being dis-

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[53] **c.f. Bolter / Grusin (2000).**

played, linking to Yahoo! Shopping – the typical modus operandi of walled gardens. Also, the neutral reputation of the template seems to make it a mighty tool for credible advertisement. Or is it a coincidence that among all other brand names Nikon is the only one with its logo being displayed? (*Status*: 20.06.2007)

The use of templates implies the dividing of competencies, while the user is responsible for providing content and in this case Flickr is responsible for the presentation. The division of competencies allows Flickr the expansion of its function while the user is still dependent on directives and boundaries created by the service. She/he probably doesn't even notice the transfer of the competence to decide on the form of presentation.

One example for this dependency is the limited degree of customization; it seems that the user is only allowed to cast a ballot about the form of presentation when it comes to personal profiles. MySpaces enables its users to insert CSS code to style their profile pages, yet doesn't provide a tool to facilitate such customization in an easy way – it is rather accepting than enabling the users to modify their profiles. YouTube currently allows its users to choose from nine different color themes, and the user can choose an own background image. Besides some minor color changes that is about as much customization as possible. Flickr merely lets you change the arrangement of photos and photo sets on your page and some social networking services like Facebook or the German equivalence StudiVZ allow no customization at all. This is where users are styling their screen names as the only way of expressing their individuality; hearts and stars are added to names and special characters are used to create smiley faces or graphical patterns.

Audience economy seems to not only affect the form and presentation, but also influence the perception of the content created by the user. The acquaintance of the given tools being subversively directed generates invisible yet sustained borders to their usage – a fact that most users don't seem to notice but instead approve of the given structures.

IV. **YOUSER REACTIONS:** CONSUMERS, FANS, COUNTERSTRATEGIES

1. Shallow use

Despite a narrow group of users and artists the populace' acquaintance with the Web seems to be rather simple-minded. Newbies or users who are not proficient in finding their way around probably appreciate templates dressing the Web in standardized pages and transparent navigation. Of course the Web mustn't be a medium dedicated to a small elite of geeks who know how to make use of its functions. But wether it is because of the guidelines and limitations or the design of Web2.0 standard templates, the users seem discouraged from experimenting with the given tools. Uploading copyrighted material seems to be the only infringement of the terms of use, and inappropriate material gets flagged and banned quickly.

Hence the hype around the openness of Web2.0 facilities only applies to their intended use, the easy publishing and categorizing or the browsing of content. The result of this trend can be seen in the popular sharing of rather shallow but entertaining content such as funny videos, news about tech gadgets, blogs about e.g. inventing imaginary words[54] or the broad sharing of (soft-)pornographic videos and pictures. Most of the media hosted by Web2.0 services seem trivial and even forgettable with the only purpose of easy consumption.

2. Fandom and participatory culture

What users do affect through their participation in Web2.0 is the paradigm of cultural production with its distinction between the producing and the consuming instances. Instead of separating

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[54] *c.f. http://wordimperfect.blogspot.com*

between the producer of content on one side and the recipient passively consuming content on the other, Henry Jenkins depicts a loop of production as the accurate portrayal of media culture in his book „Fans, Bloggers, & Gamers". Fans use the Web to aggregate, appropriate, remix, mash up, and recirculate material which results in a perpetual loop of cultural production; wether it is the simple gathering of images to a personal MySpace page or the skillful remixing of music or video and uploading it onto YouTube – content is being interpreted and cultural meanings modified.

Media firms and content providers have noticed the fact that fans are the most loyal consumers and therefore a valuable type of audience members. They've started to produce content most appealing to such consumers; television series represent the most common example for the approach of generating content to cause fandom. Both the frequent providing of new content and the common addictive character, achieved by cinematic strategies like cliffhangers (raising the tension specifically at the end of each episode), are typical signs for content providers trying to establish a loyal audience. Such content designed to generate fandom is designated for appropriation by the consumers and allows their own interpretation. „Cult works were once discovered; now they are being consciously produced, designed to provoke fan interactions. The producers of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, for example, were fully aware that some fans wanted to read Xena and Gabrielle as lesbian lovers and thus began to consciously weave *subtext* into the episodes."[55] This way the enhanced competencies of fan communities are being rewarded, fostering the participatory form of fandom.

Popular movies like Star Wars are being re-dubbed and uploaded onto the Web by fans, producing new cultural connections and sharing them among each other. There are several versions of Star Wars as pure ASCII text (American Standard

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[55] *Jenkins (200) 145.*

Code for Information Interchange), where ASCII characters create very rough graphics representing the scenes of the film – the aesthetics of pure text expresses the attitude to life of geeks, the bulk of Star Wars fans.

So another explanation for YouTube's success besides the basic form of perception might be the viral character of its videos. People are sharing their favorite video clips, spreading them over the Web, appropriating its content and remixing it. The new content is then recirculated and shared in the same way.

A popular example for the viral character of videos and their remixing is the *Star Wars kid*: In 2002, high school student Ghyslian Raza from Quebec recorded a private video of himself imitating a character from Star Wars Episode I, wielding a golf club as the double-bladed lightsaber and adding sound effects with his mouth. The video was leaked online and shared by users mocking the overweight teenager's ungracious moves. Worldwide, fans remixed the video adding Star Wars music, sound effects, and lightsaber lights, placing the video in the context of Star War's science fiction genre. The clash between professional looking effects and the kid's terrible fighting performance add to the original video's charm; there are countless adoptions on the Web featuring Raza fighting against agent Smith in The *Matrix Reloaded* or as *The Incredible Hulk*, Mel Gibson in *Brave Heart*, and as *the Lord of the Onion Rings*. Another version shows him fighting against himself, a second Ghyslian – you can easily find a collection of different versions of the Star Wars kid video on the Web. Besides the sad fact that Raza was target of a worldwide mockery[56] this example shows the effect of a participatory pop culture and its potential for influencing cultural production.

Sometimes content providers even follow the fan's wishes to reward them for their loyalty – producers of TV series have changed the plot according to its viewers' demands – but in the case of an online petition to get Raza a part in *Star Wars: Episode*

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[56] *Kahney (2003).*

III, which has been signed by over 16,000 people[57], the producers were just ignoring the fact that Raza had already become part of Star Wars culture.

The approach of combining cultural meanings and creating something new by mixing and remixing material on the Web has established the term of a *mash-up* (which I have earlier referred to as the combination of different source code into new applications). The Web allowing more audience autonomy, as mentioned by Napoli, fosters this approach which, if formally contemplated, highlights the specifics inherent in the Web as a platform.

Fandom which was once based on mailing lists and conventions has skyrocketed as a global form of participating in cultural production and is now based on the possibilities of the Web2.0. Mash-ups have become a common strategy for net.art which is why they are often confused with each other. But they really just represent a characteristic use of the conditions created by and specific to the participatory Web.

3. Culture Jamming

An alternative approach to dealing with the structures of today's media landscape is the emancipation from mainstream culture. Instead of taking part in the enhancement and production of content produced or facilitated for commercial reason, the means of mass media are used to reflect about its structures and create a commentary about itself. Opposed to immediacy, hypermediacy is a strategy to highlight the properties of a medium and exhibit its modus operandi. It is intended to make the viewer reflect about the influence it is having on the content that is carried. Culture

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[57] c.f. http://www.petitiononline.com/Ghyslain/petition.html

jamming, as Mark Dery calls it[58], questions the established way of a cultural production strictly related to commerce.

Through media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerilla semiotics activists are trying to point out the fact that „commercial imperatives rarely encourage media firms to urge their audiences to be engaged producers of a civil society or to expect news and entertainment to contribute toward that goal", as Joseph Turow puts it.[59] Mass media monopolies „fundamentally shape the main streams of entertainment and news into environments that harmonize with sponsors' desire to sell their products."[60] This means mass media are not autonomic but produce culture in a way beneficial to advertisers' commercial interests.

Through the modification of advertisements in public space or the misuse of media these structures can be subverted. An example for the infiltration of advertisements is the simple disfiguring of billboards, as in the modified slogan „Just do it... or else!" referring to Nike's production practices which include so-called sweat shops in developing countries. An example regarding new media is called „Google bombing", where the systematic and collective linking to a certain website gets Google's algorithm to index that site as the first result when searching for certain keywords. This way the public perception of terms can be influenced and subversive connotations added to the reputation of establishments.

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[58] **Dery (2004).**
[59] **Turow (2005) 104.**
[60] **Turow (2005) 104.**

CONCLUSION

The myth of complete consumer freedom and the seeming focus on giving users the chance to express their individuality is to be questioned. Web2.0 has opened up a world of opportunities and introduced technologies that have changed our relation to media. But as long as strategies like the walled gardens and the segmentation of media are just to construct differentiated, homogeneous audiences then the world of Web2.0 is not much of a democracy. If customization is only supplied as a strategy to cultivate a relationship with the consumers in order to target them with ads and to keep them comfortable and within the reach of control, and not as a feature available for expressing one's creativity then the user is put under tutelage. The revised attitude towards the way of treating users seems to be limited to structural and aesthetic issues and only affecting usability.

Closed systems of user-defined categories and the offer to express one's individuality inside preconditioned templates terminally satisfy the consumer' needs. As long as its features are seen as new the Web can create a feeling of freedom and democracy. Compared to Web1.0 a lot has changed, not only from the user's perspective. The focus has shifted from providing content which attracts audience groups that advertisers want, to simply letting the audience create and categorize content themselves, while the main concentration seems to now lie solely on marketing and the audience economy.

All this constitutes the circumstances under which content is being produced and thus shapes both online and offline culture. We have to understand that production heads into a certain direction and a specific acquaintance with the Web is being fostered because of commercial interests. This is to be seen critically in all fields of culture produced by media. Earlier concepts of systems superior to the WWW such as Bush's Memex and Nelson's Xanadu could be partly realized using today's technologies and standards but there seems to be no interest in improving the Web as a semantic medium for augmenting human

memory and communication forms. Instead, media firms are searching for ways to transform „free social network[s] into a colossal marketing machine."[61] The user seems to accept this fact since the new gestalt of the Web is perceived as a blessing.

I would also like to point out the fact that people like Tim O'Reilly, who coined the term of Web2.0, are cashing in on the growing hype. As media companies are eager to integrate its elements into their structures to tap in on its popularity, O'Reilly sells his texts about Web2.0 principles through his company *O'Reilly Media,* explaining how to successfully apply its principles. The general confusion about *what* Web2.0 actually *is* surely has a positive effect on O'Reilly selling his expertise. Nobody wants to miss the next big thing, tapping in instead of being left out while O'Reilly and other experts are holding lectures and offering books and .pdf files. Hence the term Web2.0 also refers to the current momentum of a hype around the Web with its new promising future. This is even more evident with experts already speculating what Web3.0 might look like, hoping to be the first ones to benefit from the next buzz.

In a way the *marketing* of the term Web2.0 applies to the strategies used by offerings *described as* Web2.0; in other words, the term Web2.0 doesn't just refer to the technical aspects but even more to the strategical methods apparent in the operating mode of today's Web.

Of course projects like Wikipedia are redefining the user's role. Blogs and other free ways for publishing are granting the freedom of speech and the chance to pedal politics and the public mind. Free online applications and media hosting services have turned the Web into a platform, and social networks are generating global villages. But it seems that the „lurking media revolution"[62] is not accomplished by the people.

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[61] *Reiss (2006).*
[62] *Möller (2005) 49.*

If the users were aware of their actual potential power then the Web could become the vehicle for a new digital democracy. The outdated system of copyright and other restrictions that reimpose the hierarchy of commodity culture could for instance be overcome through pressure of the collective and online activism. Collective knowledge, the hive mind, could initiate a process of reconnoitring and accomplish media awareness; at some point the public may get used to the Web's offerings and take the open and free form of publishing for granted. This is when technological features and handy gadgets could fail to blur the media firms' questionable curse of action.

It is in fact bold of media firms to leave the providing of content up to the audience – but as long as everybody is behaving it seems to be also very lucrative. "There are a thousand ways to make money when you have this many people,"[63] says Ross Levinsohn, former President of Fox Interactive Media about My-Space. Combined with the feedback potential of Web2.0 services the product placement and viral marketing closely ties commercial interests to the production and perception of culture. Invisible forms of advertisement take away the audience's capacity to reflect on or filter out commercial messages, so that culture and marketing merge into one.

Some people like to point out the fact that none of the *You*s who filled the *Tube* with content saw a cent of the money it was sold for. The idea that such Web2.0 services would be worthless without the users working for it, uploading and organizing content, seems logical. But it is utopistic to believe that media companies will ever intend to just improve our lives without any commercial interest. Yet it is time to start thinking about ways that the user can benefit alike from the given structures besides the free use of Web2.0 services. „It would be naive to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter

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[63] **Reiss (2006).**

into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than *semiotic democracy*"[64].

It would be daring to state that all technical achievements summarized by the term of Web2.0 are the sheer result of a new marketing strategy developed by the culture industries. In most cases it is unclear if the aptness of Web2.0 solutions to grasp information useful for marketing surveillance was consciously designed or is just a pleasing side effect of what was intended as a helpful tool. But what is certain is that through the specific use of such services and their incorporation by media conglomerates they can facilitate mighty marketing methods.

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[64] *Jenkins (200) 136.*

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