

Chapter one - Internet Culture

The web's missing link

Have you ever wondered where do the Internet memes or funny pictures on your phone came from? who made them and why? We know that pictures, jokes and other works of art have to come from someone, usually the question stops here, we came up with an answer and no further discussion is needed, but is this really a satisfactory answer? Media literacy attempts to answer these questions and explore communications mediums and their impact on people. To explore Ethics with a digital perspective means to speak the language before we can ask difficult questions, we must understand the social and technical aspects of the web and software to truly identify problems and to find solutions.

On our everyday life we enjoy discussing movies, music and other commercial products. Items such as movies, music, literature are media, media is the vehicle that delivers any kind of communication, if we want to say any message it has to be said verbally, that's media, if I wish to spread my message through the television or the Internet, that's media. The majority of us have a fascination for a specific movie, artist or celebrity, talking about media means criticizing and analyzing but very few of us create media rather than consuming it. Or at least this was the case before the Internet: Today more people than ever are creating something new, if you want to write you can open a blog, if you want to make a movie you can open a YouTube account, and little by little more people are getting involved in making new stuff. If you don't consider yourself a creative person you are still involved in making new original works, in past days when we wanted to share a particular moment or story we remembered it and speak about it, today the average teenage decent just chat about cool occurrences or stories, they capture them with apps like Snapchat, Snstagram or Whatsapp, these programs allow you to place stickers over the video or photo, you can add drawings or emojis and text, what was just a regular video was creatively transformed into something bigger than the sum of its parts.

For educators & food for thought:

What professions don't need creativity at all, are there any examples?
why?

Everyday people create content by creating and uploading their pictures, we transform content by commenting on a picture or post, we share our opinion, ask and answer questions online. The Internet is a platform driving mass communication, creativity and innovation, from a small scale Internet users are encouraged to speak their mind and on a big scale users are proud to show off their artistic works.

Sharing and remix

Humans have a natural drive for innovation thanks to evolution but once we figured out how to fulfill our basic needs like food and shelter we begin to specialize, we dive into social, economic, artistic and more and more abstract subjects. But creativity and innovation is commonly perceived unrealistically, we tend to think of creative leaders like the stories that portray them, for example: *Isaac Newton was just stinging about minding his own business and suddenly it hit him! He felt the apple hitting his head and it gave him the hypothesis for gravity, then he ran for the lab and after countless testing he figured out the theory of gravity, just like that!*... well this story sound very heroic and all but it kind of misses the point of creativity. Stories like Isaac's or Thomas Edison tell us how their great minds had a revelation of sorts, this eureka moment is often portrayed as a spark of genius, not because all creative or scientific genius experience this moment, but because it makes a better and more memorable story.

For educators & food for thought:

What other examples of eureka moments are there? use the Internet to verify the validity of the story.

What people tend to forget is that creativity or having a great idea is not a matter of one eureka moment, creativity is an additive process. To explain with more detail I will borrow one of Richard Dawkins's allegories: Imagine the creative process is like climbing a mountain, it is very unreasonable to believe that one can get to the top of mountain creativity with one single jump, to assume all creative works are spawned out of one single leap is ridiculous, a more probable explanation is that to go to the top of mountain creativity it takes millions of small steps, the addition of every single step ads up to an achievement greater than the sum of its parts.

To create something new is to add to an existing concept, the iPhone is nothing more than a cellular phone plus an Internet connected computer, a Ford model T is just a motor plus an engine. All inventions follow this pattern because all creative works are additive.

Putting the pieces together has never been easier than with the digital landscape, with the web everyone with access can download any piece of media and combining them into something new. This is known as *remix* in the world of music, thanks to digital recordings artists unlocked the ability to use bites of other people's songs in works of their own, this is known as sampling. The action of taking someone else's work and using part of it for your commercial benefit may sound unethical at first glance but sampling and remixes alike share one thing in common: they are transformative, for example the 1976 track 'Theme from the Planets' arranged by Dexter Wansel is an instrumental synthesizer driven jazz inspired song, the song is very upbeat and dreamy, it features Charles Collins and Joe Johnson on drums and percussion, the song is most known for it's beat,

most popularly sampled on Dido's 2000 hit single 'Thank You', a more relaxed and hopeful feeling track with religious connotations, the two most popular interpretations is that the singer is either thankful with her love interest or god, this is far from the melancholy and rap driven track 'stan' from Enimem, the track released on the year 2000 features a remixed version of the first verse from Dido's 'Thank you', the track tells the story of an obsessive character called satn who is obsessed with the real life artist Eminem and how his obsession drove him to the grave.

From a happy synth driven instrumental to a calm worship song to a gloomy rap song is as far apart as you can get. sampling and remixing is crucial for songwriting and other creative activities, in the case of music it could be argued that there is a limited number of catchy chord progressions, drum patterns and melodies and this is why picking and matching elements is key to creating a great work of art. The same holds true for literature, movies, poetry, etcetera. A remix culture is a sign of embracing creativity and in a more literal perspective, it can be concluded that innovation and inventions are essentially remixes of previously available media and technology.

For educators & food for thought:

Discuss your favorite song with a partner, then discuss your partner's favorite song and look for similarities.

Ask yourself: have all the inventions been invented? justify your answer.

To illustrate this point let's play a simple game, don't read ahead just trust me: I'll tell you the plot to a story and you'll try to guess who is the main character:

There was a state of peace and tranquility on the world, peace driven by the status quo, another day and life stays the same in a etiquette balance like it always has been, we follow our protagonist on the mundane and get to know him but suddenly something happens, a signal is calling for him and he must enroll on his quest, but he can't confront a strange new world on his own so he gets assistance from a new character with great wisdom, now he heads straight in towards his goal, he has great difficulty and faces his greatest challenge and is defeated, the protagonist enters his rock bottom only to recharge and accomplish his greatest challenge, after he succeeds he must get great treasure from him and has to get out of the strange place he tied himself in, he returns to regular life and finds out that something changed inside him and around him, any loose ends with previous characters gets fixed now and the story ends with self reflexion.

So did you guessed whose story was that? if you think I cheated you by describing a vague plot line and that there is no correct answer you'd be wrong! only 50 percent. That was the story about the hero of Joseph Campbell, on his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he explores the archetypal hero and his writings have sparked great inspiration on the world's most famous and critically acclaimed storytellers like George Lucas, Bob Dylan, Stanley Kubrick and many others.

In a way all stories about heroes are remixes on the so called *hero's journey* (the popular term used to refer to Joseph Campbell's hero), an artist heard a story with this structure and it's deep connections with everyday struggles of the common man inspired him to write a similar story.

"Art is the retelling of certain themes in a new light, making them accessible to the public of the moment."

&

"Star Wars has always struck a chord with people. There are issues of loyalty, of friendship, of good and evil... The theme came from stories and ideas that have been around for thousands of years."

George Lucas

Extra resources:

Learn more about The Hero's Journey

Stories, structures and archetypes are the foundation of all stories, and to remix is analogous to the creative process, just think on all the movies, books, music that is based on another creative work, filmmaker Kirby Ferguson said it best on his classic 2010 video essay 'Everything is a Remix'. Ferguson argues that to remix you need to: *copy, transform and combine*.

"It's how you remix. You take existing songs, you chop them up, you transform the pieces, you combine them back together again, you've got a new song, but that new song is clearly comprised of old songs, but I think these aren't just the component of remixing, I think these are the basic elements of all creativity"

Kirby Ferguson at TEDGlobal 2012

Extra resources:

Watch 'Everything is a Remix' by Kirby Ferguson or his TED Talk

It rimes with gene

Using big artists as an example for remix culture doesn't really give us the full picture, to understand remix culture we are going to dive into how ideas are shared and the title should give you a clue of what this section will build up to. But first of all *what is remix culture?*

Going back to the opening quote on the meaning of freedom: no fear, being free to create means no fear of punishment for creativity. Empowering to create, tearing down barriers of entry and promoting creative works are characteristics of a remix culture. On the other hand you have a consumer culture, a place that encourages the consumption of media only, being feed entrainment through the television screen constantly is a world we could create, this is also commonly

refereed as a *read only culture*. Professor and political activist Lawrence Lessig coined this term of read only culture, analogous to a computer's hard drive, culture can both read and write content to itself.

Read - write culture and remix culture are used interchangeably due to Lawrence's analogy, in other words free culture and remix culture is a culture of innovation and creativity first. The most obvious example of constant remix and editing of content and probably the example you are most familiar with is *Internet culture*.

Great minds taking notes and inspiration from one another and basing their designs and works through tedious amounts of labor is a thing of the past, now with the connections provided via the web, we can all easily copy, transform and combine any work with a few clicks or taps of the finger. The world wide web was a strange place at the beginning, nobody knew how to use this new medium: Should you create a website, about what topic? and then what? do you leave it there forever in hopes somebody discovered it like a hidden gem? well if natural history had taught us anything is that *evolution always wins*, at one point of humanity's history we had a similar problem: how will an individual human survive? well by developing a society, one might not stand against the terrors of nature but a group will stand a better chance. And so the net became social, people realized that there is no difference between the best website with nobody to share it with than no website at all and so we formed online groups and Internet culture began to form.

The interactions between Internet users begun to shift towards free culture, since there is no cost for reproduction or copy of any online work, no more labor required to copy a text or video or image lead to countless montages and collages of media. The products of early Internet media may seem strange compared to today's Internet media but they both share something in common: their means of survival. Ideas and socially shared media go through a natural selection and evolutionary process just like living organisms, living creatures look to survive nature for as long as possible and ideas look to survive in the minds of the public for as long as possible.

Think of it like newspaper headlines, the writer of a story or report wants their story to reach more people to increase sales and therefore their salary, so a writer asks himself: *How can I capture the most hearts and minds with one story?* Writer 'A' might write about something controversial, like politics, and writer 'B' may make a story about something popular like a celebrity pop star. Both articles A & B are fighting for the public's attention and only the more interesting article will win in the end, writers like Jeff Weiss won the attention of the public on October 30 2018 by combining politics and pop stars by writing an article on r&b and rap artist Post Malone and comparing him to Donald Trump among other allegations. Articles from writers A and B are entities fighting for survival via natural selection by the public reader, the ideas behind the articles combined and evolved to form article C. These parallels help un-clutter the field, and we can see the similarities between the spread of popular ideas and natural selection and evolution.

The spread and evolution of genetic information is carried *through the media of genes*, while the spread and evolution of ideas in the general scene is carried *through the media of memes*. Genes carry genetic information while memes carry cultural information, to drive the point further Dictionary.com defines a meme as: “*a cultural item that is transmitted by repetition and replication in a manner analogous to the biological transmission of genes.*” The term *meme* was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins on his book titled *The Selfish Gene* in 1976.

The word meme itself is contrived from the Greek word *mimic*, it means *to imitate* or *mimic*, a way to think of it is mimmic-gene or meme for short. Memes go way back, since all ideas are essentially fighting for survival in our minds only the best ideas will be remembered, a classic example of a good meme is clothing, since it was such a good idea to protect our delicate bodies from the outside world we never went back, this meme has engraved itself into our minds.

The intersection between ethics and evolution can quickly diverge into heated debate, mainly due to religion, practically all religions claim that their particular deity or god is the author of morals and ethics, also most religions also hold belief in a creation myth incompatible with evolution, for example the Christian bible claims that Adam was created as a fully formed man in a small period of time, but evolution claims that species change slowly. This is the conflict that religion faces with evolution: was man formed in an instant or over millions of years?

Just mentioning that a conflict is present between evolution and religion may seem offensive to some of you, now imagine how heated these debates can get! While I will not argue about religion or evolution, I will bring up a common criticism of evolution to prove a point. On a public debate on Australian television between Richard Dawkins and Cardinal George Pell a provocative question was asked. Richard as an evolutionary biologist holds the belief that on the question between evolution and religion there is no question about it, Richard advocates for evolution, the question raised against evolution and science was: *Without religion, where is the basis of our values and in time will we perhaps revert back to Darwin's idea of survival of the fittest?*

Richard replied:

“I very much hope we don't revert back to the idea of survival of the fittest in planning our politics and our values and our way of life. I've often said that i'm a passionate Darwinian when it comes to explaining why we exist, it's undoubtedly the reason why we're here and why all living things are here. But to live our lives in a darwinian way, to make up a society a Darwinian society, that would be a very unpleasant sort of society in which to live, it will be a sort of thatcher, right? and in a way I feel that one of the lessons of learning about Darwinian evolution is a lesson in how not to set up our values and social life.”

This robust reply can be summed up as a simple phrase: not because its nature it means it's OK, just because something is popular it means it's good, in the case of this argument Darwinian evolution it's what's "so popular", the question can be rephrased as: "*If you believe in evolution so much that you claim it to be true, then why don't we live in a Darwinian society?*" and Richard's answer can be rephrased as: "*Not because evolution created modern humans it means that people should behave like survival of the fittest*".

The main takeaway from this reply is that not because something is popular or in place it means it's morally acceptable, the example of the nature of humankind regarding evolution is one of the most extreme versions of this argument but valid nonetheless, when it comes to our daily lives we encounter a great amount of systems or ideas, some of them work for the good of the public like a hospital, but other systems / ideas may cause severe harm to human kind like slavery. Identifying the right side and the wrong side between hospitals and slavery is child's play, but we must also identify that some ideas or systems that we approve of might not be functioning for the better of humanity, for example eating meat, most of us eat meat while still holding the idea of how immoral this practice truly is, but we do it anyways. "It's the way it's always been" is not a sufficiently good answer, in the case of animal slaughtering it makes it worst! Remember not because something is popular it means it's good, in the case of meat-eating a case based on health could be made, but that doesn't lift moral blame from us: "We need to slay some living creatures to be healthy" will only teach us how truly cruel we are by nature. Veganism and meat-eating is another heated debate, hard questions like these need to be asked and discussed for morality to move forward.

Harmful by design

To be critical of the systems on the Internet means to be honest with ourselves regarding design, look around, everything around you except the natural world was purposely designed to fulfill some function or for its aesthetic value. A pencil is designed to be ergonomic, yeah indeed the design of a pencil is extremely simplistic, it is essentially a pointy stick with graphite, but think about the shape of the cylinder, some have triangular shapes and some have hexagonal shapes, think of the eraser on top, why on top and not sideways? and why a hexagon and not a plain cylinder? Questions like this are asked by designers everyday, making a good product or planning a meeting requires design, a poor design will lead to inconvenience or potentially to harm. A poorly designed car can lead to an accident by an unexpected blind spot, but some designs are set out to work against our interests.

The problem of obesity can be solved by clever design, but it can also be amplified by manipulative tactics: For example those shelves in convenience stores and supermarkets filled with candy, for some reason they always seem to be closest to the cashier and to the height of children, or the salt peanuts being provided

for free in a bar. These are examples of harmful design, a child will bother the parent to buy candy because its so low that the child can hand it to the parent and bars give out salty snacks to make you want to buy a drink. If we define good design as design that serves its function, then candy shelves and free peanuts are good design, they serve their goal: to drive sales, these practices are “good design” in this way, but they are also harmful design, because they serve their purpose at the expense of the consumer.

Thinking about harm outside of physical pain is a strange concept at first, but *if the goal of an action is to make someone else worse off than before* then that action is considered harmful, since this definition accounts for more than just one type of harm (physical pain) we can say it has more explanatory power, and therefore it serves as a better definition. Making someone worse off purposefully also accounts for psychological damage, abuse of power and discrimination, with this new definition we can classify accessible candy and free peanuts as harmful, other examples of harmful design exist but here we will focus on the digital.

Consider a movie review website through the filter of ethics, is it intrinsically wrong to review works of art online? To answer this question we must look at three main points: *Intent, methodology and results*, if the intent of a movie review blog is to only give bad review to the films of one director to belittle his message then we can say he has bad intent, now if a movie blog publishes an opinion piece about an independent film, this is not a very well known film and the writer gives praise to the movie with intentions this movie takes off in popularity, well then he is working in good faith, but if to make his point on how beautiful the shots are and how stunning the attention to detail is in the costume design he has to take a picture of the film to then publish the pictures with his blog to help his thesis, his intentions are pure but if to make a point the author is infringing on copyright then his case is suddenly not as good, a third online review does not violate copyright law and has good intentions but regardless of the fact of his honest work he might trigger a chain of events leading to a morally questionable result.

An example of the latter may be hard to come by, especially since measuring the results of any given outcome will be spread into two main categories: Those who agree that action X lead to an immoral results and those who disagree, regardless if you consider yourself a moral relativist or a moral objectivist you must acknowledge that since morality is ever-changing the discussion of ideas is crucial to perusing moral truth, to realize if the world we are creating is a desirable one we must start talking now.

Extra resources:

Learn about moral objectivism and relativism and metaethics on this video lesson by PBS Digital Studios

Consider the case of *Alex Jones*, now before we continue let's keep in mind that I am not afraid of touching taboo topics or controversial opinions, not to long ago I used Richard Dawkins's debate response to bridge together the topic

of the origins of the term “*meme*” with an introduction to harmful ideas and design, the ideas publicly sported by Richard are highly controversial and by only mentioning his name I risk being but inside a box: “*He supports this person or candidate so I will disregard his opinion without second thought*” is part of the internal monologue promoted by identity politics, the factory workers going on strike is not helpful productivity-wise, and if we wish to push the boundaries of whats consider moral we mus open our minds to the other side of the argument too.

Now back to Jones, Alex Jones is an independent radio host and news show host, some consider him a journalist and others consider him a conspiracy theorist. Let’s try to empathize with Alex, we will examine his case but not his politics or wherever he is right or wrong on his views, let’s amuse Alex Jones considers himself an honest person and that he genuinely believes on the reports he broadcasts, in that case then Jones has good intentions and he has done nothing strictly illegal by broadcasting his opinions, now lets be more specific: Let’s talk *Pizzagate*, back in 2016 the email account of John Podesta was hacked, Podesta is most popularly known as the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign manager, one of his emails refereed something called *Spirit Cooking*, in context spirit cooking refers to having a nice meal, but when looking at anther email some people interpreted as a satanic ritual of sort that takes place in a small pizza place, said rituals include child pornography and other servilely provocative accusations, this is were the name Pizzagate comes from, as a combination of pizza and water-gate. This interpretation was in part popularized by Alex Jones on his show, Alex is also famous for his news delivery style, he likes to report on a big story on how terrorists or any other antagonistic vague figure is out to get you and to destroy society, then he makes a call to action to “fight” or “resist” the evil plans of “the enemy”, mostly by adverting his own personal products to support the show, the most famous example is when Alex Jones claimed that “*the government is putting chemicals in the water that turns the frogs gay*” and then doing an ad-read for his personal brand of water filters.

Because Jones is often too aggressive on his call to action some fans have taken his reports to the next step and tried to take justice in their own hands, in the case of pizzagate on December 2016 Edgar Maddison went to self investigate inside the pizza store with a firearm, while no one was injured Edgar did fire his weapon three times. This resulted in the general public turning against ALEX Jones and the ideas portrayed in his show and several lawsuits followed since.

From the perspective of Alex, this situation lost control, he (probably) intended to warn the people of a corrupt government controlled by external forces, in the voyage for justice within legal broadcast laws Alex had broken no rules and intended a positive change in the world, exactly the opposite he created, still with good intentions and methods the consequences of his actions called for assault of an innocent pizza worker.

Users, creators and developers on the Internet must ask themselves these three basic questions about the morality of their work: We have to self examine

our *Intent, methodology and results*. These three points help us evaluate the consequences of our actions and creations online, the question of ethics is a complex one, it's not a matter of black and white but rather of better or worse, we must learn to identify the different shades of gray in the scale of morality and ethics, otherwise we enter the weeds of *us versus them* and we give in to identity politics and the separation and division of culture.

In the same way that villainous historical figures don't view themselves as evil, E.g. Hitler saw himself as fighting for a good cause but his actions were a kind of *nesesary evil* to better society, in that same way various tech giants think of themselves as doing work for the world, some of their employees acknowledge the harm their products do to society but reconcile it as a *nesesary evil*, in fact even some portion of their users think of their actions as a *nesesary evil*. In the debate of environmentalism versus the average technology enthusiast the point may be raised that some minerals needed for the fabrications of processors and other components of smart-phones and computers are drying the earth's natural resources and that even most mining operations are made in war or conflict zones, resulting in thousands of deaths for the purpose of manufacturing a black rectangles that we are going to throw away in 5 years, environmentalist asks: Is this desirable?

The most common response by the tech enthusiast usually is: "*Well what is the alternative? Technology may cause suffering but is also a great tool for good*", said argument can boil down to: "*That's just a necessary evil*".

With our three main points for measuring the ethics of any given action we can analyze the field of making a smartphone: Smartphones are generally made with a mixed bag of intentions, some innovate for desire for a better user experience or to further connect people around the globe, but the majority of companies design and manufacture a new model of phone each year simply for monetary reasons, on one hand a company has to make money to keep food on the table of their employees but on the other some companies are clearly abusing their position as a mono/duopoly and driven by greed, that covers intent, now for methodology we find ourselves another mixed bag, some companies have very strict policies on keeping their production line green and free of ethical injustices, while other companies couldn't care less about the environment or their employee's health, the results are also really confusing and mixed, phones and tablets do connect the world, but they are also partly responsible for addiction, depression and other social problems driven by the systems built on top of our phones.

We can conclude that in the most broad and general way of referring to smart-phones they are mostly neutral, for sure there are bad reasons behind making them and their negative effects on society are huge but they also have their upsides. Technology is just a tool, we are responsible for using it for good, phones and other electronics aren't inherently evil or good, they are tools with great potential to do both, just like salty peanuts, they are not evil or good by nature, but when we use them in a way that results on mostly negative consistences they become harmful by design.

Learn more about design

Read articles and listen to podcasts about design

Whatever goes on the Internet

Now that we understand the basis of creativity (to copy, transform and combine), how those newly created ideas spread similarly to genes and to identify harmful ideas we can be critical about specific platforms and systems. The average Internet citizen counters various sites and systems in his day to day life.

Think about your morning routine, what is the first thing you do on any given day? the most probable answer is that you check your phone. According to a survey done by ReportLinker Insight on January 2017, 45% of Americans use their phone in bed just as they wake up, early bird phone usage goes up to 66% if the user is of the ages between 18 and 24. With estimated 55.1% of the entire world population using the Internet by 2018 the impact of the Internet is gigantic, most of the users will only get to know a small chunk of the web since the common user only delves with the products of tech behemoths like Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple.

If you are a new Internet user and you want to get to know more about it, what do you do? well after we get familiarized with a few technical details like what devices you need to access the Internet, how to actually get connection from a provider, how to set up WiFi and how to use a web browser your first instinct is just to open up your browser and ask it anything.

Answering questions was traditionally done by independent websites, someone with a passion project would make a site about some specific topic and it was the user's job to find these sites if they seek answers, but finding them was really hard, especially because websites are like home addresses but without a logical order, websites are located on domains, these are usually refereed to as links, because when a website mentions another site you can click on it and it will link you to it, so to discover a new site you had to know the link for example you had to memorize that <https://alex-esc.github.io/read.digitalrights/> is the link for reading this project, you'd find you because of word of mouth or because some other website you do recognize mentioned it.

Today we have search engines, they are websites that use algorithms to analyze one page, they search for pages that mention other pages, and more pages mentioned on those pages and so on, after a search engine had scraped all that information it categorizes it like a phone book with search functionality.

If you have a Windows computer and you use the default web browser then your questions will be answered with the bing search engine, bing is in fact owned by Microsoft the creators of Windows. If you use any other browser like Chrome, Safari or Firefox then you might be more familiar with the Google search engine. If you are a more casual Internet user maybe you use whatever

program is installed as long as it works, or any search engine as long as you get the results you like, but if you know any technology enthusiast you might have heard him lecture about how Chrome is so much better, how everybody uses CHrome so you should too and so on.

First of all, if you are the one pressuring your friends into using Google, please stop, it's annoying and doesn't help the free market's invisible hand. And as a second point just note how search engines are the gatekeepers of the web, all information ever known to man is free for everyone with an Internet connection to access *as long as you ask a search engine*.