

# THE COMMODITY AND THE INTERNET

## INTERACTIVITY AND THE GENERATION OF THE AUDIENCE COMMODITY

### INTRODUCTION: THE SENSE AND SENSATION OF MEDIA CONVERGENCE IN THE GRAPHIC INTERNET STAGE

In the last three years, the internet<sup>1</sup> has emerged as an essentially new media form that is reorienting the ratio of media use. Because of its breadth, it is a cultural form that continually denies simple and complete definitions of what it constitutes. From certain vistas it appears to be primarily an information source; from other vantage points the internet resembles magazines; in its personalisation of use the internet also converges with forms of communication that are linked to fanzines and often takes on the register of private correspondences. Nevertheless there are pressures on the structure of the internet that are pushing it towards some definitional spaces.

This paper investigates the specific push toward the commodity form. The direction towards commodification of the internet movement is not general; it is specific to developments of what I would call the graphic stage, a transitional media form that has made surfing the net feel like flipping through a glossy magazine or the interlinkages of a multimedia game or encyclopaedia CD-ROMs. The graphic internet stage relies on a construction that is textual and graphically enhanced through software overlays such as Netscape and highlighted by sample images, sound bites and occasionally short moving images. Because of bandwidth difficulties for downloading moving images, the graphic internet stage cannot reproduce broadcast images/sound quickly and easily and has greater success at reproducing textually based media forms. Nevertheless the graphic internet stage embodies an

expansionary desire to represent other media forms. It hints at a future of convergence, where the internet replicates broadcasting and print media in a way that subsumes their original transmission forms into desirable packages that highlight 'interactivity': the user/viewer engages in a process that blurs the line between their consumption and their active production. The continuing integration of other media forms has also led to the search for how the internet can institutionalise some form of similar income/profit generation. The question that hovers vulture-like over the form is what kind of commodity can be constructed and exchanged through the internet that generates value?

What has developed is a sensation of media convergence on the internet as media corporations have positioned themselves to reproduce their past successes at commodifying information and cultural commodities by constructing websites. For instance, Dr Eric Schmidt, the chief technology officer at Sun Microsystems (the creators of Java), proclaimed rather sheepishly that, because of its low tech nature, radio was the next big thing of the internet 'because people like to listen to radio when they're working' (Sarino 1996, 36). Some successes have been launched. Simulcasting through the Net has been attempted by radio stations and concert promoters as the techniques for circumventing the restrictive nature of broadcasting are proliferating. An early 1996 estimate of internet webcast companies was listed as 620 by the *Economist* (1996). CU-SeeMe, an early 90s technology of videoconferencing, represents another challenge for allowing video signals to be distributed more clearly and easily over the

world wide web. Xing and Streamworks are being improved to allow for better moving images over the internet.

The greatest signs of integration of media forms are the presence of all of the major media corporations on the internet. NBC has signed recent agreements with Microsoft to establish news services via Microsoft Network (Coates 1996, 57). All of the principal telefilm production houses have some presence on the internet with each film release packaged with a specific interactive website. Many of the larger newspapers have also launched internet versions of their dailies. The *Wall Street Journal Interactive* caters to the internet and multimedia market specifically, while providing an omnibus of general information that replicates its hardcopy version. In Australia, the *ABC*, the *Australian Financial Review*, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have large sites for information access. News Corporation integrated a general online classified ads section of its various papers in 1996. The prominent position of media corporations on the internet replicates past patterns of media ownership as they have moved from old technology to new technologies much like the way key newspaper owners in Australia were some of the principal owners of private radio and television from the 1920s to the 1950s.

The desire to be a player in the media future is certainly part of the current generation of cultural production on the internet. It is, however, a very particular if not peculiar desire that illuminates the relationship of the internet to the commodity. What I wish to develop here is that the internet has generated a *promotional* relationship to the commodity which has transpired because of three key factors:

- the historical construction of freedom of the internet;
- the particular nature of the information commodity and how it is structured to have some form of materiality in contemporary culture;
- the technological incapacities of the current graphic internet stage to transmit fully other media forms, and thus the over-representation of incomplete promotional 'samples'.

None of these factors are simple cause and effect structures – there is a complexity in the development of the internet which has a certain indeterminacy. Nevertheless, the internet is not a technological supertrain or highway which in some unidirectional fervour is unstoppable as much of the rhetoric has painted it; it emerges from previous institutional structures, prior models of the organisation of information, and distinctions and delineations of power that identify shifts – but shifts that have some history. The path of internet development can therefore be charted as it slides along some familiar paths. Through looking more closely at the key factors identified above, one of the familiar paths is discernible: the convergence of the internet on the *audience commodity* which resembles the key commodity exchange of previous media forms.

### THE CONCEPT OF THE AUDIENCE COMMODITY

Commodity status here refers to the specific emphasis on the exchange value of a given product. In classical Marxian thinking, the exchange value supersedes the importance of use value, where the process of exchange in effect becomes the very site for the increased value of a given product. These commodity conditions are the basis of the many forms of capitalist economies. Although mass mediated cultural forms have certainly not been unitary in their integration into this patterning of value in contemporary culture, the prevalent structure of advertising as the support mechanism for cultural production has certainly a hegemonic status. For example, the revenues from most newspaper sales are dwarfed by the sales of advertisements, both display and classified. Television and radio have operated without any subscriptions sales to viewers in many nations and rely completely on advertising revenues. Contemporary media have two quite specific commodity constructions:

- in its generally advertising-supported structure it is the site par excellence of the process of constructing increased value in production; and
- the audience is made material in the process and sold as a definable commodity to advertisers which can be called the 'audience commodity'.

The audience commodity has been the object of considerable focus over the last fifteen years in communication studies. Dallas Smythe (1977) began what was labelled the 'blind-spot' debate, which looked at the implications of thinking of the television audience as actually labouring while watching commercials because of their collective adding of value in the circulation of the commodities advertised. Sut Jhally (1987) has expanded this argument in his study of advertising and the development of the fetishistic qualities in their content that identified the central importance of advertising in the organisation of contemporary consumer culture. Ien Ang's writing on the audience debated the need for establishing the quantifiable identity and concept of the audience for the media industry to continue to operate (Ang 1991). For example, when the American recording industry changed their method of collecting information about sales of recorded material from reports from key record stores to direct bar coded sales information, the entire charts of best-sellers suddenly shifted to be dominated by more country artists. In television, changes in the determination of who is watching from log books to Nielsen electronic black boxes (often called 'people meters') transformed the constitution of the audience for advertisers in different countries at different moments. Much of the development of ethnographic research into the activities of the audience has been developed under the hypothesis that the stable construction of the audience commodity produced by media survey corporations presents a picture that is only industrially applicable (Morley 1986, 1990).

Varieties of technologies have been employed to first stabilise the reading of media audiences and then more accurately identify the demographic/psychographic profiles of the various audiences. Increasingly accurate information about the linkage between programs and audience consumer predispositions has helped to produce sophisticated television programs that are ambient to the needs of a cluster of sponsors interested in very particular demographics. The quintessential program that worked for a very specific demographic without looking to producing massive and

universal appeal was *thirtysomething*: it was never in the top ten most popular programs in its key American market and yet nevertheless it was deemed a success (Brooks & Marsh 1992, 1094-1107). The internet in its partial alignment with this history of the construction of the audience commodity represents the potential for the generation of more accurate profiles of audience activity. This potential of information about users of the internet is critical to understanding the convergence of the media with the internet beyond simple technological convergence. Nonetheless, the internet has a variety of origins which pre-empted a simple and straightforward integration of one media into another. Understanding the two key factors that I have outlined above – the construction of freedom around the internet, and the previous patterns of making information into a material form in contemporary culture – illuminates the emergence of the commodity on the internet.

### FREEDOM AND THE INTERNET

There are many interweaving histories of the internet that do not permit an easy reduction of what it constitutes. However, there is a prevailing discourse which has situated the internet in a particular construction of freedom. In its movement from military ARPANET to its close connection to educational institutions, the internet has, over the last two decades, operated as something publicly funded – a free research tool which is now embraced for all sorts of purposes without an exchange value beyond informational exchange. Importantly, an attribution of economic value would have aligned its development much more closely with telephone use and metered calling. In addition, the inability to control what is actually sent between internet users allowed for the proliferation in the variety of messages that were being exchanged – messages that went well beyond simple research-driven queries. The content of files transferred and the correspondences between users produced a panoply of cultural forms and production. In the expansion of connection to the internet through modems and internet service providers (ISPs), the range of discourses, the variety of discussion groups, and the cultural

content available through the internet likewise expanded. The expanded content available through the world wide web and gopher protocols made it seem that there was a universe of information, readily accessible and readily downloadable.

Combined with this construction of access, there was the parallel development of a hacker subculture. Hackers, usually teenage boys with computers and modems, developed an entire hierarchy of proficiency in learning the codes to get into some of the most sophisticated computer networks internationally. The film *Wargames* (1983), sensationalised the ability of this generation of computer enthusiasts to break into American Pentagon computers and launch a nuclear strike and counterstrike. In a line of films that includes *Sneakers* (1991), the 1996-release *Hackers* continues to romanticise the power of the young computer hack in defiance of the large corporation. In the late eighties and early nineties a real group of telephone switching hackers, called Masters of Deception (MOD), wreaked havoc in the American phone system that led to a series of criminal charges and the development of counter-security companies and cyberpolice units in most western countries. Their leader, who went by the call name Phyber Optik on hacker bulletin boards, typified this culture. Phyber Optik was obsessed with demonstrating his capacity to break into telephone systems and then freely share that information with the rest of MOD. It was a culture that was vaguely associated with something that was outside the parameters of the law, and hacking in cyberspace possessed the possibility of engaging in something that challenged the authority of the largest corporations and government organisations in the world (Slatalla & Quittner 1995).

Hacker culture's illegality dovetailed with another strand of techno-rhetoric that emerged with the development of home computer technology. The hacker culture represented the extreme end of the technoutopia and anarchic freedom that has been an element of computer development, and also linked to an even longer tradition in science fiction literature. The emancipatory discourse of personal computer development has been most closely associated with Steven Jobs and the user-

friendly Apple Computer. The democratic visions of home computer expansion have been linked with the conception of telecommuting and the proliferation in the 1980s in a variety of magazine articles of electronic cottage work, where the authoritarian office culture of the downtown would be replaced by a romantically conceptualised pre-industrial cottage industry of production. Linked by modems, everyone would now be able to work in the idyllic structure of the home office. The home computer, in conjunction with a modem-supplied connection to a larger network, provided a freedom from contemporary work regimens and an almost Marxian utopian conception of the integration of workers' intellectual and physical labour.

These various strands of freedom are at the very core of the rapid expansion of the internet. Precursors that identify these constructions of freedom are easily identified in many of today's websites and pathways. The software programs designed originally for university/education purposes have resulted in the graphic internet stage that most users currently enjoy. Netscape was developed by graduate students led by Marc Andreessen at the University of Illinois-Champagne and, until it was commercially manufactured and marketed, was released as Mosaic. In its transformation, Netscape remains free to download in certain versions and for educational use. The concept of shareware, where one can receive software applications for free (with potential payment only for updated versions of the software or manuals which will improve software's usefulness), remains a prevalent pattern of exchange on the internet, one that resembles the university research exchanges of a previous era. Access to university libraries was one of the early networked large sources of information. Variations on the hacker tradition have developed into the libertarian conception of usergroups and bulletin boards and their protection of free speech. Censorship is the *bête noire* of longtime internet users. This sentiment has been actively reconfigured for the development of the commercial pornographic sites on the net, a particular configuration of activity that I will revisit in the conclusion. Access and connection have been one of the key selling features of

personal computers and the international marketing of Windows 95 over the last year. Microsoft's commercial slogan of 'Where do you want to go today?' imaginistically indicated the capacity of the computer to visit any part of the contemporary world.

All of these continuing threads of freedom and access are important to understand the current graphic internet stage, very much a transitional phase in the development of the internet. Their importance is critical to understanding that the internet is perceived as something that is free in some way. There is an expectation in internet use that one is cheating, or, in a more mild sense, getting something for nothing. The connection to the graphic images of sophisticated websites, the capacity to download photographs from a variety of locations or the ability to see segments of *Seinfeld* or *The Simpsons* without charge are some of the giddy pleasures of the internet. Embedded in these practices – indeed embedded in the very meaning of the internet – is the sense of cheating. The best way to describe netsurfers' relationship to the graphic internet stage is to draw on Michel de Certeau's conception of the tactical and the larger, more organised conception of the strategic (de Certeau 1984). The internet is an amorphous body with an unlocatable centre and a connection to a wide variety of sites of very powerful institutions alongside those of the relatively powerless. The hierarchical divisions are not so clearly in place between power and lack of power. When one is engaging in internet use, one senses a connection to quite powerful institutions – phone companies, media institutions, netzines – and yet when one alights on a particular site there is the sense that one is gaining without the exchange of money. It is like the mild abuse of the institution that de Certeau says most employees probably do: they might take a memo pad or a pen from work. De Certeau, through the diversionary practice of 'la perruque', describes these actions as moments of the *tactical* that indicate more than anything else a weak struggle between the powerful and the relatively powerless (1984, 25-26). The internet with its wide construction of freedom and in some cases anarchic mythos plays in the pleasures of the tactical for the user. In an everyday real sense these tactical moments are central to

the experience of the internet – the feeling of cheating, weak thievery, and playing slightly out of the bounds of what has been clearly sanctioned is deeply embedded in the internet's institutional growth and development over the last twenty years.

### MAKING THE COMMODITY ON THE INTERNET

In apparent direct contradiction with the pleasurable sentiment of the internet as 'something for nothing', and the general quality of freedom that surfing the net has embodied, there are concrete efforts to commodify the varied contents of the internet. On one level virtually all of the media corporations are engaged in internet productions. On a more basic level there are a variety of new internet related corporations that have spawned an equally new generation of multimillionaires. When the Netscape originators floated the company in 1995, the Nasdaq exchange in San Francisco had the largest first day public offering in history. This record was only surpassed in March 1996 by Yahoo!, an internet search/cataloguing company, which had an even greater public capitalisation. The internet is clearly a site for the exchange of value. Internet Service Providers, such as America On-Line, Ozemail, and CompuServe, have made monthly subscription charges that resemble cable fees a normal form of exchange for internet users not connected to university systems. These organizations are being challenged in the succeeding generation by the telecommunications companies which are entering into the business of providing internet services.

The clear pattern of both ISPs and the software search engine companies in constructing value on the web (and thereby generating revenues and profits) is conceptualizing the internet as a unitary commodity. The entire internet is sold as a package and the means of accessing the package become the primary source for profit. There may be a time dimension to determining the value of the internet, but this is constructed not in terms of information received but pure access. The model then is similar to two previous communication technologies – the telephone in terms of access, and cable television in terms of subscription with unlimited and relatively unrestricted use.

Peter White's articulation of the concept of 'transactional' space underlines this construction of value outside of content itself that is very useful in understanding where the construction of the internet commodity is located:

We are used to the idea that transactions occur in specialised, often purpose-built physical spaces (such as 'shops where merchants display goods'). But the new media and communications systems are leading to the development of equivalent electronic transactional spaces (White 1996, 5).

White goes on to explain that servicing the transaction produces information which becomes a valuable commodity. For instance, the telephone company, in its servicing of message transactions also produces information about who calls whom at what time. It has sold this information as an add-on service back to its subscribers (White 1996, 6). Controlling transactional space and setting up the environment for the variety of exchanges that occur on the internet, according to White, is the essential place of economic activity. Policies that only look at developing content therefore miss the way in which content is secondary to where and how it is accessed and displayed (White 1996, 8).

There have been several attempts to construct the information of the internet as a commodity in and of itself which have more or less failed. *US Today* employed 70 personnel to set up its website for an electronic newspaper. After six months of electronic publishing, it had attracted only 2000 paying subscribers (Schwartz 1996, 74). This statistic differed markedly from the hardcopy readership of 2 million. In terms of profits and revenues, *US Today's* experiment in constructing a virtual newspaper through subscription was a financial disaster, and it soon returned to its free access format (Schwartz 1996, 76). There was a significant difference in the returned free format: advertisements were strategically placed around any form of news content. (The *New York Times* has also constructed its subscription to become eventually a paid form. However, the launch date for this change-over is continually pushed back.)

The shift from the information commodity to the structure of advertising seems to be

the predominant channel for the generation of income and for the structuring of the value of the information commodity on the internet. When one signs on to Netscape one sees a series of ads asking you to enter their world of products and services. When you actually get to an information site like an electronic newspaper, on the borders are a series of billboards with intriguing slogans to encourage an errant and reguided surfer towards particular products. Here are some recent examples which obviously play with the construction of promise, and also work to construct a form of desire that can be answered through a subtle shift of the mouse and a mild-mannered click of its key:

On Lycos: 'Click Here and we'll give you the world.' A picture of a swirling blue and white earth accompanies the text.

On Yahoo: 'Gold Mail – zips tips – get paid to read ads.'

On the *Wall Street Journal*: 'Seen any big words lately?' – which if clicked upon leads to IBM's home page and the possibility of seeing its latest television commercial.

'NO Shirts NO Shoes NO Problem – Big Yellow – Yellow Pages'.

'Billboard' seems to be a particularly apt metaphor for the style of advertising on the internet and matches the highway metaphors for the rest of the content: they are graphically intriguing through their production of verbal and visual puns; they are dependent on attraction as one surfs by while concentrating on other forms of information; and they generally play with the feeling of moving to something for nothing that is part of internet culture.

Advertising comfortably enables the internet to maintain the tactical feel, the hacker hangover of internet use. Its obtrusiveness pays for the content so that the internet surfer continues to ride the wave of something for nothing. The visually stunning magazine formats that are produced for commercial internet sites rival and surpass the best layouts of magazines. Indeed, the internet's cool sites can be likened to the magazine rack at the newsagency with the key difference being the series of linkages which span the content between the magazines. *Hotwired*, the electronic magazine equivalent of the

graphically emulated *Wired* magazine (which is the equivalent of *Rolling Stone* and its construction of a magazine for a massive youth culture by 1971), literally produces content that dances in hypertext and linkages. Its content is supported not by subscription but by advertisements. The hope to connect to the reconstruction of desire in contemporary culture is a feature of an advertising mentality (Marshall 1987) that is pandemic in current production. New consumers continue to be the most valuable, the most sought after readers/users/ viewers because their patterns of consumption are still forming. If the internet occupies the site of significant cultural activity by youth and by young adults with disposable income, then an irrational frenzy of interest – an advertising mentality – follows. In charting the types of products advertised on the internet, one can begin to see that the generation of pure computer technology advertisements has shifted somewhat to a wider range of products.

Unlike other forms of advertising, internet advertising has no standard construction of value. As *Wired* has reported, rate cards, the common technique for establishing how much an advertiser should pay for space, are completely malleable on the net (Schwartz 1996). With television, the card is determined by the audience size factored over time. With the internet, the idea of time consumption by an audience is harder to define. Advertisers are still unclear as to the value of their advertisements on the net but are still willing to engage in the practice because of the perceived potential audience.

It is true that the estimations of the number of users of the internet have been difficult to determine but there is a general desire to construct the audience size so that the audience commodity can be isolated and regularly determined. Estimates as high as 19.5 million have been floated for the North American market with corresponding exponential growth. The mid-1995 Nielsen Media Research survey of North American internet use discovered approximately 10 million users (Hill & Baker 1996). Statistics for Australia are usually pegged at around 800 000. The frequency of use is much different than other media forms which challenges the internet's value as an

advertising source. For instance, 7.2 million of the 10 million North American users were actually found to be either infrequent or occasional surfers (Hill & Baker 1996). Nevertheless, Nielsen continues to chart internet use: in September 1996 it began publishing a top-ten list of sites most often visited. Nielsen has expanded that service to clients through an identification of time use – not just the number of hits on a particular site – to determine the audience and its level of commitment. The desire to calibrate the value of the internet audience is everpresent in its expansion.

With such a vague conception of the audience, the internet is susceptible to an implosion of value. In recent months there have been a series of articles circulating in newspapers and magazines that speak of the 1996-97 internet wipeout, where the influx of capital arrests and there is a pandemic decline in its commercial viability (see, for example, Bayers 1996, 125). In terms of revenue, what is the relative value of advertising on the net as opposed to more traditional media forms? What impetus is driving this construction of the internet audience commodity where rate cards are established and agreed upon by everyone?

The fundamental difference with internet advertising relates specifically to the general value of the internet experience. The experience is often metaphorically linked to surfing, where the user alights on a specific location and then uses that location to migrate somewhere else. The pleasure is somewhat nomadic and almost always anticipatory, a temporary sentiment that the next location or link will produce some sort of satisfaction. Its non-linearity and linkages shift the user into a sensation of possibility and potential. At least at this graphic internet stage, the promise, the look and the potential far exceed what is actually located at each site. The internet, from the personal webpages to the grandest of corporation websites, is fundamentally a promotional form. The links are teasers that draw one to change directions, and every homepage producer engages in this dance of the fireflies trying to attract the internet surfer. Lateral relationships encouraged through hypertext links are not that dissimilar to the lateral constructions of advertisements in the flow of television program narratives.

The commodity promise of the internet, however, goes beyond its current status as basically a promotional form. The promise is its interactivity. Interactivity is part of the general aesthetic of computer use, an aesthetic that has moved from the video game industry, passed through the television industry and now is the *mine d'or* of the internet. One tries to engage the game player in the action of the system so that they become part of the system in some fundamental way. For example, some Macintosh users accuse the IBM systems of being counterintuitive. In competitive contrast, the Mac makes intuitive sense and the human-machine interaction is therefore more in synergy.

Interactivity is an inclusionary strategy; in cybernetic terms – the basis of information theory and artificial intelligence – the target is integrated into a complete system. The reaction of one element in interactive synergy produces an effect of alignment in the other element. Information in the cybernetic interactive system that is negative is reinforcing the norms of that system. (Cybernetic theory was built on the development of the smart missile in order to eliminate human error: the key feature was a feedback loop that reconnects target and missile until they are unified as a constantly refining and perfecting unity.)

The internet provides many sites for interactive play; but what is often overlooked in the play is that there is a generation of information. White's *transactional space* isolates specifically on the generation of information produced by any transaction, and the control of that new information becomes the site for the expansion of property and value on the internet (White 1996). Interactivity then can be translated into increasing the knowledge of the audience/user. As discussed, the internet is an elaborate apparatus of promotion. In its design, if you enter a particular website this indicates a greater interest or engagement. If that particular website is an advertisement, this level of investment is very important information for the advertiser. What interactivity offers contemporary consumer capitalism is more accurately defined target markets, demographically cleanly demarcated by the user. From its military origins, the very design of the internet is directed towards not

only a complex web with no centre, but also the capacity to survey users. Interactivity implies both a greater connection to users but also the means to record what users are doing with the technology.

It is precisely the companies that are generating information from internet use that are actually profiting in the graphic internet stage. The search engine companies such as Alta Vista, Lycos and Magellan are all generating information about the audience and work partially as counting companies – recording the number of 'hits', the pattern of those hits, and assessing the relative popularity of sites. This calibration of internet use is determined by the gateway to information. The gateway to finding information is ultimately the site where the determination of audience size and commitment is made. The search engines, and Netscape as the ubergraphic supplier, are thus in the ideal position to generate information about internet use. As patterns of use stabilise, the information about use and sites will also stabilise. The counting mechanisms and the elaborate techniques to survey users are leading to the rate cards for advertisers of the future. A device called a cookie is used to chart the activities of internet users of search engines as they move from the first page of a particular site to follow-up hyperlinked pages. The user leaves 'crumbs' behind of their activity which serve to help construct the macropatterns of use that are permitting the development of audience-like entities on the internet. The replication of the audience commodity for the general advertising sensibility of the internet is advancing toward reality. As would be expected in this transformation Nielsen in Australia is developing and implementing a two-tiered auditing of the internet audience: the process of determining the popularity of sites will help determine the new hierarchies of value on the internet content. The content of course will be surrounded by advertisements.

### CONCLUSION 1: GIFT AND COMMODITY

Because of the ideological power of advertising as a recognised part of consumer culture, it is easy to think of the particular and peculiar developments of the internet as normal and natural. What I want to reiterate



is that the internet emerges from an institutional history that considers the informational exchanges in a non-commodity form. The various utopian conceptions of anarchic freedom that have been part of computer development and emblematically articulated by the hacker culture flavour more general internet use. Combined with the research and education orientations of the internet throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a substantially different relationship to use and value has been part of the exchanges of information. This construction of what constitutes the economic value of information from the education and research side resembles the institution of the library. The library is not devoid of the construction of information commodities; but, as an institution, access has always had a universal dimension and objective. The internet is saddled with this sensibility and from the corporate world, one would say that it is encumbered with the sensibility. John Frow has written on the distinction between gift and commodity that indicates the long relationship of knowledge – and its raw material form as information – with the gift (Frow 1997). It has existed in traditional cultures and survives within the industrialised nation-state in the library and to a lesser degree in the museum and church.

It is essential that universities as institutions, and a wider general public policy practice recognise the continuing and significant value of seeing information in terms of the gift within contemporary culture. Intellectual property rights are certainly a form of income protection for cultural producers; but they are also a form of establishing the segmentation of information into unusably small units that are dependent on a capitalist structure to reorganise or package them to give them value. The internet must be seen by universities and public policy practitioners as a skewed construction of the value of information towards the concept of the gift. The gift and information in contemporary culture are separating quite dramatically in an era that Kroker and Weinstein have labelled 'pancapitalism' (Kroker & Weinstein 1994). The discursive construction of freedom on the internet has formed a window (not of Microsoft origin) through which debates about public access

and private property can be once again effectively challenged: the boundaries of the commodity and the reach and implications of a pandemic promotional culture can be negotiated. The central role of the university in internet culture is weakening; any future cultural initiative that works to redraw the boundaries of the commodity form must play within promotional culture's construction of creating surplus value and exchange value. Universities, as institutions that hold now a vestigial connection to the freedom of the internet, can be engaged in the process of advancing information as a gift towards something usable, pragmatic and applicable: they can work towards turning information into the materiality of knowledge. A redeployment of this engagement in production through evaluation of the internet is the critical role of universities if not wider public policy.

## CONCLUSION 2: PORNOGRAPHY AS THE PATH TO THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE INTERNET

On the other side of the gift/information/knowledge construction are the ways in which this same discourse of freedom is being connected to a promotional aesthetic and, through interactivity, a production of incredible knowledge about the user. As I have mentioned, there are many failures in turning the internet into pure transactional space where some form of exchange either for information/intellectual property or for selling of physical commodities takes place. The sites of the greatest success, as I have indicated, are the various search engine companies and intranet providers that produce information about users and intensively constructing various audience commodities.

But in terms of content, there is a particular group of sites that stand at the threshold of melding the variety of discourses of freedom into promotion and ultimately into purchased commodity form. Pornography, interestingly, is positioned on all the appropriate cusps. It has always been on the edge of legality, where censorship and regulation have worked to determine the range of permissible images in most societies. Being on this edge allows pornography to be a player in the construction of freedom that I have linked to de Certeau and the tactical: accessing pornography gives the sensation of

transgression to a much more heightened degree than many of the advertisement billboards that can only weakly seduce the user to click and link. In that edge space, pornography's presence is a sign of the anarchic and the unregulated nature of the internet. Pornographic sites also are in line with the general promotional aesthetic of the internet where anticipation is only partially satisfied. The offer with Interotica of greater possession, or real-time video chat, or more explicit or complete images may be the impetus for people to overcome their fear of commercial transactions over the net. Promise and promotion lead to a greater level of interactivity with the particular sites. *Penthouse* and *Playboy* are two of the most popular websites with the greatest number of hits and landings often estimated at over one million a day.<sup>2</sup> Internet pornography is thus the very leading edge of the commodification of the internet precisely because of its relationship to the discursive history of internet freedom. Recent internet commercial history has been focused on the search for the so-called 'killer application' that will push the internet to complete saturation and the reach of its commercial potential. In the search for the killer application, pornography has many of the assets.

### CONCLUSION 3: FORMING THE KILLER APPLICATION/ FORMING THE COLLECTIVE SUBJECT

The production of a killer application in computer industry jargon implies the construction of a mass market. It is associated with software that has kneaded the computer into an instrument of accessibility. For example, Microsoft Windows applications in their emulation of Apple Computers icons and applets provided a clear tool that made IBM-based computer use accessible and open to a massive audience of consumers. Not only was it instrumental in expanding the business of desktop computers, it was equally important for expanding the reach of the home personal computer through its iconic simplification and translation of DOS commands.

Internet-identified companies' attempts to produce a killer application have been modelled after these software achievements

in the development of the home computer. The significant difference with the internet is that the market is not only a group of consumers, it is a *continuing entity* that resembles the audience of the broadcast media. Accessing the internet is a form of connection that allows for the conceptualization of a massive number of users. There is the believed anonymity of use which is similar to the anonymity of television viewers. The aggregate subject produced is ultimately the representation of the disciplining strategies or containing strategies of media-like entities on the internet. The killer application, whatever its ultimate form, is therefore a structure that guarantees the continuity in the size of the audience. The aggregate size of the users connected is a formulation of power and value that is ultimately the object of exchange.

There are serious counters to this formation of a collective subject in internet culture. For instance, the proliferation of personal webpages and other forms of cultural engagement and production indicate a changed ratio of production and consumption from other media forms. What we see media-like entities on the net working towards is the establishment of relative value. The customisation of homepages when you link to a newspaper like the *Wall Street Journal Interactive* is indicative of this blending of the personal subjectivity of the web with a concerted push to gather the collective subject for exchange. Your electronic newspaper has what you are interested in positioned on the opening page with its mix, for example, of tennis and international business news. The user's sense of interactive control, personal engagement and, to a limited degree, cultural production, is massaged into the establishment of this particular source of information as ultimately more important than someone's personal webpage.

The internet collective subject that is produced in this developing hierarchy of information sources that can guarantee a consistent number of hits/subscribers has some particular features which differentiate it from the broadcast audience subject. As I have described, the interactivity allows for the two-way flow of information.

Personalisation by the user also implies the possibility of the collection of personal likes and dislikes by the producer so that the general predispositions are mapped and then aggregated in all their diversity with other individuals. Internet users are not necessarily located specifically in nations or spatially as broadcast audiences have been; but the kind of information generated from interactivity allows for determining bands of audiences that are constructed transnationally. Like niche magazine advertising, the collective subject constructed through these aggregate patterns of counter searches of user's activities and preferences becomes very valuable to a cluster of advertisers of associated products. To encourage the depositing of information, many websites are market surveying their users through a variety of incentives. The space of activity of internet play becomes the site for constructing internet value.

The idiosyncratic use of the internet then becomes stabilised into identifiable patterns. The solo anonymity of users becomes translated into clusters of interests which convey the new information of collective value. The reinvigoration of a modern collective subject developed in previous media forms – albeit mutated through the information generated by internet interactivity and historical constructions of freedom and individuality – continues to be the *modus vivendi* of the most successful internet-related corporations.

## ENDNOTES

1. The internet has transformed over time as to what it means. In my work here, I am using a standardised usage that goes beyond the first generation that was purely technically defined by a certain kind of access. The internet now entails a 'network of networks' that originally was based on TCP/IP protocols but now implies networks that can connect to these protocols using other means. So I consider the internet to be the networks themselves, the community of users, and the information resources that are available through the technology. This definition has been derived from E. Krol and Internic Directory Services.
2. In a review of the top ten search terms sent in to Inktomi, the following words were employed: sex, nude, pictures, adult, women, software, erotic, erotica, gay, naked (Steinberg 1996, 182).

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*David Marshall is the director of the Media and Cultural Studies Centre in the Department of English, University of Queensland, where he also lectures. He is the author of Celebrity and Power, University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Email: D.Marshall@mailbox.uq.oz.au*

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# ANZCA

AUSTRALIAN & NEW ZEALAND COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

## NEWS

### Annual ANZCA Conference

Plans are well underway for our Annual Conference, on the theme of Communication in Practice, to be held at La Trobe University, 7-9 July 1997. Sue Turnbull has issued a Call for Papers and 'Themed Conversations' (deadline 25 April). She invites contributions that reflect on 'how communication shapes our everyday encounters with each other and with the cultural institutions we embody and enact'.

Her questions on this theme include:

- What does it mean to theorise the practice of communication?
- What do our theories and understanding of communication mean in practice?
- How can our academic endeavours contribute to the practice of communication in the everyday world?
- What do theories have to say about this practice?

Please contact Sue in Media Studies at La Trobe University, Bundoora VIC 3083.  
Phone (03) 9479 2513  
Fax (03) 9479 3638  
Email Medset@lure.latrobe.edu.au

### Grant Noble Prize

I would like to draw the attention of all postgraduate students and their supervisors to the Grant Noble Prize, awarded in honour of our much-loved colleague, the late Professor Grant Noble. The prize, open to all postgraduate students (excluding full-time academic staff) enrolled in an Australian or New Zealand university at Honours, Masters, or Doctoral level, consists of a cash award of \$250, Annual Conference fees, and travel expenses to the conference.

The prize will be awarded to the best paper submitted to the conference. Papers should address the conference theme and may range from 3000-5000 words. They should be submitted to Sue Turnbull by the closing date for the Call for Papers, 25 April 1997.

**Roslyn Petelin**  
**ANZCA President**  
**School of Communication**  
**Queensland University of Technology**  
**Email r.petelin@qut.edu.au**