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IDS Response: Mediating Between the Extensive and the Intensive

*This is all in continuation of my previous topic, regarding the conflict between a tool's invisibility and its transparency. In that text, I argue that while "the perfect tool is one that is invisible to the user," invisibility must be coupled with transparency such that it doesn't rely entirely on nescience.*

In Archive Fever, Jacques Derrida begins by examining the archive as a physical location, which "shelters itself and, sheltered, conceals itself." The archive is both transparent in its availability and obscured by the authority of an institutional location. The physical embodiment of an archive within a container—especially within an education institution—shrouds information in mystery, and that mystery gives the information power and significance. Similarly in The Present Age, Kierkegaard laments that with increased access to information, so comes increased nihilism. He writes on the proliferation of information as "gains in extensity what it loses in intensity." When information becomes wildly accessible to the public sphere it becomes wildly insignificant: everything is available with the same degree of importance, so everything becomes equally unimportant. In contrast with the authority of a physical location to house the archive, the abstraction of locality makes information comfortably accessible. Specifically, the daily newspaper and the popularity of cafe culture erased locality: people could now extend their reach of knowledge outside their immediate contexts. However, Kierkegaard claims, the comfort of accessibility is coupled with the subversion of passion and commitment. When that powerful physical location is lost and when everything is equally obtainable, people cast broad nets to garner a variety of topics but they do not master specific areas of study.

The Internet, as we know, is proclaimed as the next great equalizer (succeeding the failure of public education). Everyone with an internet connection is hypothetically privy to the same wealth of information. This is a fully realized state of Kierkegaard's nightmare. Hubert L. Dreyfus writes:

"In newsgroups, anyone, anywhere, any time, can have an opinion on anything. All are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere. [...] In a blog anyone can express his or her opinion about anything without needing any experience and without accepting any responsibility. But since putting one's ideas into practice and so taking risks and learning from one's failures and successes are required for acquiring expertise, most bloggers have no wisdom to contribute."

The Internet, as an open archive abstracted from physical space, sheds its locality in favor of comfort and accessibility; but the idealistic anti-elitist philosophy, according to Dreyfus, encourages an exponential decrease in the quality of knowledge and contribution. Instead of thoughtful discussion transitioning into informed action, the Internet permanently dwells on discussion and casting a broad net that looks at every problem from endless new perspectives.

Reflection never transitions into action on the Internet, Dreyfus claims. And because action never takes place and because higher-level learning requires physical experience, learned skills can never advance beyond competency. Subsequently, when there are no masters or experts, the degradation of available information is compounded.



Fig.1: A parodic example of trendy design, generated by TrendList.org.

Here, the web designer plays a role of mediating between power and comfort, between extensity and intensity. Dreyfus assumes that webpages always have and always will be created with the intention of making information the maximally digestible to the user. He neglects to consider, though, that design is conscious choice, and the comfortable accessibility of an abstract open archive can be negated with a purposefully authoritative design. In this sense, the current trend of anti-logic design is a welcomed attempt to mediate the democratization of information with the quality of elitist access and subsequent contribution. The trend, which utilizes the computer's ability to generate randomization, works against intuitive hierarchical structures. Information is randomly placed within a field, and it is often color-coded with unsightly colors and an uncrackable code. In some ways the aesthetic mimics early websites when the horizontality of webpages (i.e. that all pages were hyperlinked to one another with the same priority) made the Internet largely unsearchable and made relevant information almost impossible to collect.<sup>1</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Traversing the Internet involved moving across from link to link instead of descending categorically down a hierarchy. Though horizontality is still the case of the Internet, motifs in navigation structure and trust that webmasters are creating content without the intent of deceiving a user have given the Internet a logical navigable structure.

those early stages, the web had not reached its ideal of equalization, and the content was for the most part created and accessed by the privileged and learned.

Arguably, anti-logic design even mirrors the opaqueness of the Internet today. That the actual processes and actions of web activity are obscured presents an archive that is largely confusing to the unsavvy user. As web technology progresses, and as public programming education regresses, the open archive will become increasingly "opaque" and will begin to be less comfortable to the user. Here, the sheltering provided by a physical container will be mirrored by the opaqueness provided by nescience. Should anti-logic design be applied to file structure and link structure—for example by destandardizing how links navigate on pages within the same site, or by randomizing associated pages within a navigation—the graphical user interface will echo the walls of an institution, and the contained information will again be powerful for action.