

Lee Rainie
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“Communities, Learning and the Internet”

This morning, I wanted to discuss what we've seen in our research about how the internet has changed communities and the general learning environment of users.

I take my cue from Marshall McLuhan, who noted that each technology has its own “grammar” He was referring to the way different methods of communication change the lifestyle and thinking of users.

If that's the case, then much of our research shows that the grammar of the internet is to create and foster communities. In most instances, these internet-aided communities look and feel like communities of the past, but there are new dimensions that are particularly important for librarians to understand.

Before I go into that more deeply, I want to back up and give you a brief rundown of what we have learned in our research since we last met in Nashville, so that we all have a common base of facts to orient us.

For starters, the media and communications inventory of people's lives now looks like this:

- Inventory item 1: More than 70% of American adults and 93% of the country's teenagers use the internet. A typical user has been online now for close to 5 years and has woven use of the internet into the daily rhythms of her life.

Still, the mainstreaming of internet adoption has not erased all the digital gaps that worry policy makers. The **four** most notable gaps involve age (those over age 65 are not internet enthusiasts), educational attainment, disability status, and language preference. We will be issuing a report soon that Latinos who only speak Spanish are substantially less likely to be online than bilingual Americans or Latinos who prefer to speak English.

Interestingly, we've begun to see some evidence that race is declining decline as an independent predictor of internet adoption. Blacks are still less likely than whites to use the internet, but that difference now might be largely a class issue revolving around education and income, rather than a racial or cultural issue.

- Inventory item 2: More than two-thirds of those who use the internet at home have broadband connections. It was just below the 50% mark last year when we gathered.

This is important because broadband users, especially younger ones, are very different from other citizens. They spend more time online, they do more things online, and they report better outcomes and benefits from their internet use.

Increasingly, we see that heavy broadband users treat the internet as a destination for activity and engagement with others – a place to hang out as well as get things done.

On any given day, 43% of those who are online say they've spent part of the day just browsing for fun – that represents nearly 40 million people. This is taking its toll on the attention devoted to and the time spent with other media, particularly television.

Moreover, in at least one key area we track – the act of getting news – we have now seen the emergence of a class of heavy broadband users (more than a third of those who have broadband users) who say the internet is a more important source of material than TV or newspapers. This group is particularly important because it comprises a large number of civically and politically active citizens. They are the emerging political influentials.

- Inventory item 3: Three-quarters of American adults and 63% of teenagers own cell phones

There is a great deal of excitement among publishers and broadcasters that people will use all the computer and communications power in their cell phones to access video and audio and browse the web.

That is happening to some degree, but the more interesting story to me is the underused capacity of those phones. Many people don't use their cell phones for anything other than making calls, even though their cell phones are outfitted to do much more. Only half the cell phones that CAN be used for text messaging actually ARE used for texting.

My favorite new phrase for the season is "FEATURE FATIGUE." It was coined by Roland Rust from the University of Maryland's business school and his co-authors of a Harvard Business Review paper describing widespread consumer rejection of goods that are bloated with technology.¹

¹ Excerpt available at <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/5325.html>

- Inventory item 4: 55% of adults and even more teenagers now own digital cameras and 43% of adults own video cameras.

The big story with these devices is that large numbers of people, especially those under age 25, are sharing pictures and videos online – 51% of young adults have shared pictures and 22% have shared videos. For these young people, photos and videos have become a currency of conversation and community.

- Inventory item 5: Laptops have been outselling desktops since the summer of 2005 and it's now the case that 30% of all adults and 43% of younger adults have a laptop.

This is important because it ties to another major trend More and more people are accessing the internet wirelessly.... 34% of internet users now have logged on wirelessly, an increase of nearly 50% since early 2004.

And it is doubly important because wirelessness seems to have an even greater impact on internet use and outcomes than broadband.

- And finally Inventory item 6: At least 51% of teenagers and about a quarter of adults own MP3 players (iPods and the like).... That is data from pre-holiday surveys and I'm sure the number for teens has approached 60% or even shot past it.

As they build up their tech inventory, Americans are now shifting the time and place where they consume media ...and the platforms are getting all jumbled up.

- 43% of young adults now say they “listen” to radio on a device other than the console in their home or the radio in their car.
- 20% of young adults now “watch” television programming on something other than a TV set.
- 13% of young adults have made phone calls over the internet and an equal number have set up webcams that allow them connect with others in remote locales.

As Cheskin Research puts it: “The old idea of convergence ... The prediction used to be that all devices would converge into one central device that did everything for you (a la universal remote). What we are now seeing is that the hardware is diverging while the content converges.”² In other words, we have gadgets now that give us what we want in whatever environment we find ourselves.

² Cited in Henry Jenkins's “Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,” New York University Press, NY, 2006. p. 15

On the internet itself we're seeing substantial growth in many of the activities associated with the idea of that has been labeled Web 2.0 or the read-write web. The greatest leaps are occurring among the young in areas like these:

- Content creation and feedback on those creations
- Blog creation and readership
- Use of podcasts
- Use of recommender features and reputation systems and rankings tools
- Tagging, tagging clouds and folksonomies
- Use of social media around things like photos (Flickr) and web bookmarks (Del.icio.us)

And, of course, it would be impossible to miss the rise of social networking web sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Our November survey of teenagers (those ages 12-17) showed that 55% use social network sites and 55% had profiles, though there was NOT perfect overlap between the groups.

(In contrast, 20% of adults told us in a December survey they have profiles on such sites. Our data strikingly challenge research from some commercial firms that claim to show that older Americans are pretty heavy users of such sites. In our survey, the vast majority of the adult profile creators are under 30.)

The social networking world is especially compelling to older girls – those ages 15-17 70% of whom have profiles.

And there is interesting variation in use of those sites among boys and girls. Girls use the sites to build and reinforce existing friendship networks, and while boys often use them the same way, they are MUCH more likely than girls to use the sites to “meet new friends” which essentially means flirting.

While some of those teens enjoy flaunting themselves on the web in all their glory ... or in-glory ... two-thirds of the profile creators limit access to their profiles. Our conclusion is that this is decidedly not a universally exhibitionist generation that is completely indifferent to privacy.

So, those are the notable growth areas we see.... But just as interesting as growth story, though, is the new evidence we are gathering that some activities might have reached saturation in the current form among internet users. For instance over the past 2-3 years, we have seen no significant increase in the number of people:

Using email -- one of the continuing big mysteries in our data is that a tenth of internet users do not use email

We have also seen no growth in the number using instant messaging
Getting financial information

Making travel arrangements
Doing work-related research
Using dating websites

This is not to say that the story of any of those activities has ended. Indeed, we see more intensive use of each of them by existing users – and that produces some impacts that become more pronounced over time.

Still, it is to say that that most online activities reach their natural saturation point well before universal adoption. It is important to stress repeatedly and loudly that everybody on the internet uses it for his or her own purposes. There is no uniform way internet use plays out in people's lives.

With that flick at internet chaos theory, I'll turn to the central question of how the environment I've just described changes communities and the behavior of participants inside those communities. I'd like to highlight **five** new realities about the GRAMMAR of the internet as it is articulated in communities and learning:

New Reality one: There are more people in more communities thanks to the internet. Internet users are not Bowling Alone: 84% of them belong to some kind of online community and close to 50 million people have joined a group after becoming aware of it in their browsing online – even in cases where the group's existence long predated the internet like a social fraternity or a professional organization.

We have found that internet use is one of the predictors of whether a person has joined a group. Indeed, these cyber-joiners are pretty avid community participants. They belong to an average of four different groups with which they interact online.

This suggests that **Action Item One** for libraries might involve canvassing online communities in your area that seem to care about the same things you care about ... and then trying to plug into those groups.

It also suggests that you can successfully take into the virtual world the groups that you have built inside your institution. You'd be surprised about how many people might bump into your groups during the course of online travels and then start to engage them.

New Reality two: Many communities with a heavy online component are very socially meaningful. Our findings and others challenge the commonly expressed dread that communities built around online interactions are socially inferior and lesser versions of the real communities that exist in real life.

If you've hung around in celebrity fan sites, you certainly could say that. But there is much more to the world of online communities, starting with the fact that many blend the virtual and the real.

The boundary between "virtual" and "real" is becoming less meaningful because many people toggle effortlessly between them and they complement each other.

USC's Center for the Digital Future recently reported that that half of the online communities they tracked were buttressed with face-to-face gatherings...the average length of membership in online communities is 2.4 years.... and that 43% of those in online communities said they feel as strongly about their online community as they do about the real-world communities in which they participate.³

We have found in our work that the majority of those who have online involvement with groups report they have met new people that they would not have otherwise met.

More than a third report their involvement in online communities has introduced them to people of different generations and more than a quarter say they have met people from different social and economic backgrounds.

Finally, half of our respondents report that their internet use has intensified their involvement with the groups to which they already belonged.

This suggests that **Action Item Two** for libraries might be figuring out how to offer your facilities and expertise to communities where real-world engagement would enhance online interactions. I'm thinking of Meetup here – which by the way was conceived as a dating site. No one close to the management team had any idea it would become so vital to political partisans and pet lovers – and hundreds of other kinds of communities in between.

As much as any other institutions, libraries live in this hybrid world that blends the virtual and the real, so perhaps libraries could be a local resource for organizations that are attempting to adjust to the new hybrid world.

New Reality three: There are new kinds of communities that are afforded by the internet and they are as varied as individual tastes and passions are.

The newer breed is communities built around individuals themselves. One powerful example we've studied are the communities that spontaneously arise when someone falls ill. Unlike illness support groups, which center people's connections to a particular medical condition, these patient-centered groups are made up of people who care about the sick person and don't necessarily have expertise in the condition, but have many other kinds of contributions to make.

³ "The 2007 Digital Future Report," USC Annenberg School, Center for the Digital Future.

It was very clear that collective intelligence as well as collective effort matter a lot. Credentialed experts and enthusiastic amateurs share the same space, sometimes awkwardly but frequently productively.

Another new kind of internet-age community is built around what is called citizen media or social media or user generated media. If you include the act of creating a profile on a social network site as an act of content creation, then three-quarters of teenagers and about 40% of adults have created material and shared it online with others.

And much of this content is created to elicit reaction – and build community. We have found, for instance, that 87% of bloggers allow comments on their blog and 41% have a blogroll of links to other bloggers.

The internet world is all about conversation, feedback, rankings and ratings. That is the stuff of community building.

Link love is a main social currency online and we see large numbers of emailers, users of video sites (YouTube), social network sites (MySpace), photo sites (Flickr), news sites and others posting and sharing links as communities are built around people's creations and profiles.

So, **Action Item three** for libraries might be to provide tools and tutoring to all these aspiring Hemmingways, Picassos, Spielbergs, and Jagers. At the very least ... you would profit from knowing these new community-building spaces by playing with blogs and social network sites.

New Reality four: Communities behave in different ways that are a function of the velocity and volume of information that circulates nowadays. In the age of Google and Yahoo alerts and of RSS feeds, groups are much more on high-alert status and respond more rapidly to new inputs in this real-time environment. As my friend Dan Gillmor, a leader in the citizen journalism field, puts it:

“If someone knows something in one place, everyone who cares about that something will know it soon enough.”

This hair-trigger environment has made this the age of “smart mobs” – a term coined by internet analyst Howard Rheingold that I've highlighted to you before. People have more ways to find out instantly about things and act on them collectively without any interventions from a central command structure.

Another hallmark of new group behavior is how people customize information for a “daily me” or, in the case of a group, a “daily us” presentation. Think of how many web sites you know whose frontpage has regular updates of news for people like us. Think of how many listservs play that role in your life.

You're not alone, fully half of internet users belong to listservs.

And a final dimension to all this information exchange is that so much more material is easily found these days, passed along, and then amassed in larger piles of information. These technologies empower collective intelligence in communities, so that the sum of the things the group knows, learns, and shares is greater than in the past.

It's not hard to see that ***Action Item four*** for libraries is to find ways to be helpful as groups develop and share information. You could think of yourselves as nodes in group information exchanges – as independent analysts, as fast-retrieval agents, and as synthesizers of material.

New Reality five is linked to this assertion: In our age of information overabundance, people in groups need other people more than ever – who knew how right Barbra Streisand was!!!

Social networks matter more in group settings now. The reason is that people help act as filters and assessors of information for their groups.

And here's one way we discovered that:

In a couple of surveys, we have asked people about their use of the internet as they passed through key life milestones or faced important decisions. Over time, we have found notable growth in the number of people who turned to the internet at major moments. So, for instance, in our 2005 survey like this we found that

- 21 million people said the internet played a crucial or important role as they pursued more education or training for their career.
- 17 million said the internet played a crucial or important role as they were trying to find a new college for themselves or their children.
- 16 million said the internet played a crucial or important role as they helped another person cope with a serious illness – and another 7 million said the internet played a crucial or important role as they coped themselves with a major illness.

Overall, we found that 45% of internet users – about 60 million Americans – said the internet had played an important or crucial role in helping them deal with at least one major life decision in the previous two years. That is a 33% increase from a few years earlier.

But the surprise came when we asked people to tell us the specific reason why their use of the internet was helpful. It turns out there was a close-to three-way tie:

- 34% said the internet put them in touch with other people who provided support and advice.
- 30% said it provided information that allowed them efficiently to learn about their options and compare them.
- 28% said it helped them find professional or expert services.

In other words, more than two-thirds of those people who really got something out of the internet during an important life moment said the internet was great for connecting them to other people who could help them sort through their choices.

And so Action Item five for libraries might be to exploit their positions of trust in their communities by working to become ties – sometimes strong and sometimes weak – in people’s social networks. After all, many people already think of the internet as a node in their network – kind of like Dr. Google or Pastor Yahoo or Stock Broker MSN. Why can’t you establish yourselves as that kind of resource?

So, let me conclude: The people you would like to serve are changing the way they interact with each other and the way they learn. The traits of these new communities of learning are that they are:

- More self organizing and self directed and less dependent on top-down instructions
- Better arrayed to capture new information and disseminate it to fellow community members
- More reliant on feedback and response as the community adjusts to new realities
- More tied to group outreach and group knowledge
- More open to cross-discipline insights, especially as people create and access folksonomies (content tagged by others)
- More attuned to friend and foe, competitors and allies through instant alerts and ongoing surveillance.

And

- More oriented towards people being their own individual nodes of production.

As a researcher, I see this new world as a fantastically target-rich environment for things to study.

Your role is much more complicated, scary, and exciting. You have the privilege of reacting to and helping shape the new environment for people as they try to navigate their way through the networked world.

Beyond my role as a researcher, I am particularly anxious about how you do this.

As the father of four of these new communitarians and networked learners, I would only ask you to be brilliant at what you do.

Thank you.