The Emotional Revolution through Digital Media: The Internet as a Virtual Social Reality

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The Coming Emotional Revolution on the Internet

Our society is shaped and realized through the perceptions developed and propagated through media. In years past, radio and television were the prime movers of the electronic media of social reality. Electronic media lead the way in the shaping of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about the world around us. As media increased its impact on American culture, so too did the perception of social reality. With the dawn of the internet, this process took a radical turn. Instead of a small group of producers disseminating content to the populace, the public was able to distribute material and information to each other, “Potentially, the internet can open new forms of communication, relocate and reshape how and where we work, expand our definition of community, and transform and augment our deepest sense of ourselves” (Magdoff & Rubin in Shyles et al., 2003, p. 201). In short, the internet has changed our lives.1

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While the last statement may seem overtly obvious, the motives that originally developed the internet, that cultivate it now, and the manner in which it will progress into the future are not. The internet was brought into fruition as an extension of military pursuits and academic communication networks (Potter, 1998). As Schiller expressed in his 1999 work, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*, the internet has become a global marketplace. With this said, the internet is now on the cusp of yet another change. This transformation will involve the internet being shaped and manipulated by the emotional drive of its users. This is not to say that academia, business, and information will fall to the wayside. Quite the contrary, the next internet revolution will allow individual users to communicate, purchase products, and live by way of their emotional needs and desires. The level and complexity of this change will be based upon the development and forward progression of technology: as technology becomes more advanced, so too will the process of communication and the virtual social realm in which it exists, the internet.

As broadband access increases in both efficiency and volume, so too will the internet transform into an almost endless electronic virtual reality. Users, who were once confined to limited access and information data streams, will come face to face with a near infinite source of information on a medium that can be completely manipulated. The result will be an emotional revolution through digital communication. As the infrastructure develops to allow more content to be moved over the lines, the result will be a fully integrated virtual reality of sorts—virtual social reality. This reality will be greatly shaped by the emotional drives and desires of its users.

**Virtual Social Reality**

Virtual social reality can be defined as being a realm that is capable of an almost endless ability for manipulation and control. This manipulation will also allow us to consider, in varying degrees, that the internet reality is real. When we speak and communicate in our physical reality, we are limited by the constructs that nature and physics place on us. This is not so in a virtual social reality. In this internet reality, the virtual world becomes one of immense complexity. We can communicate our thoughts, emotions, and desires with more than just language. We can communicate using all of our senses on an electronic medium that can be completely manipulated. This of course allows for a great many benefits and the possibility of ethical misuse: “[T]he Internet functions as an Amplifier: It increases our potential for good and productive work as well as for inappropriate and immoral endeavors... Ultimately, a technology is only as useful as the intentions of its users” (Banschick & Banschick in Shyles et al., 2003, p. 161).

**The Four Volumes in Review**

This review will primarily examine four books that provide information on how this emotional change will take place. In addition, this review will focus on how the change is already underway within the internet-using population. The emotional
revolution, through digital media, will permit individuals the ability to extend interpersonal emotional communication far beyond anything yet experienced, reshape their identity, seek and satisfy every emotional desire, and pursue interests, jobs, and experiences that would otherwise not be made available. This transformation has already started.

Three of the four works examined are John Ramage’s (2005) *Twentieth Century Success Rhetoric: How to Construct a Suitable Self*, Donald Norman’s (2004) *Emotional Design: Why We Love (and Hate) Everyday Things*, and John Searle’s (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*. The aforementioned works explain the importance of emotion in human decision-making. Searle promotes his theory of social reality and explains that emotion helps to shape collective thoughts. Norman believes that emotion is the source deciding why consumers purchase a certain product and/or service over another. Finally, Ramage deems emotion critical in the sales pitch or self-help rhetorician’s pitch for their products.

We will also examine Leonard Shyles Mark R. Banschick, Josepha Banschick, JoAnn Magdoff, Jeffrey Rubin, Thomas McCain, and Leigh Maxwell’s (2003) *Deciphering Cyberspace: Making the Most of Digital Communication Technology*. Shyles’s concentration is less on emotion and more on technology. However, his work provides powerful insights into the history and the present existence of the internet. Additionally, *Deciphering Cyberspace* will be used as evidence to support the idea that the internet will one day grow exponentially in its ability to move greater amounts of information over its infrastructure.

*Searle and Social Reality*

Once this evolution in information processing has taken place, the ground will be fertile for users to pursue their already emotional needs at greater levels. In a medium that can be manipulated by the content producer and the audience, with near limitless possibilities, the result will be a progression shaped by the emotional needs, desires, and wants of the users. Writing as the internet was just taking shape, John Searle explained his theory of social reality in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995). The book promotes Searle’s concept that “there are portions of the real world . . . that are only facts by human agreement” (p. 1). His theory, although written as the internet was in its birth, can easily be transferred to the information super highway: an electronic world that exists only because people agree that it exists. The internet is a reality in and of itself only because we have agreed that it is. His book will be used to demonstrate how society has shaped reality in the physical world and how these same processes and ideas can easily be transferred to the social world of the internet.

*Shyles and Electronic Communication*

Shyles and his colleagues delve deep into the history of electronic communication and explain how the internet came to be and how interpersonal communication has changed since its inception. *Deciphering Cyberspace* indicates that once we have an
increase in bandwidth to the individual user, “we will have our ‘Bandwidth Utopia’: virtual infinite bandwidth brought to fixed locations via fiber optics ... And the world will be a different place because of this” (p. 43).

Ramage and Emotional Rhetoric

In *Twentieth Century American Success Rhetoric: How to Construct a Suitable Self*, Ramage focuses on how business and success rhetoricians disseminate their material to the public. He probes deep into how business people, academics, and others use emotional communication to persuade their audience. Ramage provides an example of the success of emotional advertising as follows:

So, in placing Michael Jordan next to a box of cereal, the significance of Jordan, whose athletic skills are so transcendent that he comes to exemplify not just basketball excellence but the very notion of excellence itself, is transferred to the product. And when we purchase he cereal, his aura is magically transmitted to us who can then “be like Mike,” the exemplar of exemplarity. (p. 85)

As the internet evolves, business will progress accordingly. The role of advertising in business has always been persuasion regarding the particular product or service in question. As the internet grows into new territory, businesses will seek better and improved ways to emotionally sell their products. Conventional advertising such as thirty- and sixty-second spots, banner ads, and pop-up advertising will disappear. We will see a blurring between entertainment and promotional spot and the line erasing between product and program.

Norman, Emotion, and Consumer Decision-making

In *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*, Norman correctly argues that emotion is an integral part of the decision-making process, a process that affects the lives we lead, the media we consume, and the products we purchase: “Emotions are inseparable from and a necessary part of cognition. Everything we do, everything we think is tinged with emotion, much of it subconscious” (p. 7). Norman begins his book by describing three teapots he had purchased. The teapots vary in style and use, but were purchased because of their look, or to be more precise, they were purchased based on Norman’s emotional connection to them (pp. 3–13).

The Technological Progression of the Internet

Most users are familiar only with the World Wide Web as the internet. In fact, many individuals consider the two terms synonymous with each other. As the internet grows, people will no longer have to log on to access information. The internet will be prevalent everywhere. Mobile devices including cell phones, iPods, laptops, and new undeveloped machines will be automatically connected to the internet, sending and receiving information constantly. Users will constantly be connected to each
consciously and in ways they are not even aware of. Municipalities and states will conduct most business electronically. Academia will also evolve, offering distance-learning courses in a greater quantity than what is currently being offered and with a greater level of intricacy. Automobiles, airplanes, and other travel systems will all be connected and monitored through the internet. Much of this has already taken place. However, the level and kind of communication is what will change drastically in the coming years. Users will be immersed fully in the internet and communicating in ever increasing levels of complexity.

However, the greatest change will take place at the home. Television, the World Wide Web, telephones, and other in-home media will combine together. The infrastructure feeding homes has already begun to change. For example, cable companies once relied solely on coaxial cable to deliver television to homes. In the 1990s, many companies began replacing their main lines with fiber optics (Shyles et al., pp. 128–131). Fiber optics “offers extremely large signal capacity” (p. 129). Once companies successfully complete the coaxial to fiber optic switch, then the information coming into the home expands exponentially:

[I]f all of the light spectrum that could be harnessed for optical fiber were used, the theoretical capacity would be 50,000 Gbps or 50 Tbps (Terabits or trillions of bits per second), enough to supply carriage for a million television programs. (Shyles et al., pp. 130–131)

However, we still do not have fiber optic lines coming into the home, thus limiting the amount of information that our devices connect to; “[I] time, it may become common for local connections, eventually replacing the twisted-pair copper wire” (p. 130). Once fiber optics enters the home, the amount of information coming into our computers and televisions will be near limitless.

**Internet Users Move To Broadband**

Trends already exist showing that the population has greatly moved towards the available broadband access. In 2000, fewer than 5% of Americans had broadband. Today, the number has moved closer to 35% (Horrigan, 2005). Of course, the broadband today is not the broadband of tomorrow. However, the move away from a dial-up connection is an indication that users seek a more rich and diverse experience on the internet. Pew Internet tracks these top five reasons why individuals use the internet: to send email, use a search engine to find information, search for a map or driving directions, do an internet search to answer a specific question, and research a product or service before buying it (Pew Internet, n.d.). None of the above activities requires broadband internet access. Although cable and DSL connections may greatly speed up the processes, dial-up is adequate if you are simply sending email and searching for information. The greatest internet activity that demands bandwidth is streaming video. Watching a video or audio clip is number 18 on the Pew Internet list with only 58% of users engaging in this activity (Pew Internet, n.d.).
Horrigan (2005) argues that experience and the kind of activities the user engages in determine the method of connectivity. He explains: “[E]xperience drives the number of online activities people do, which could (though not inevitably) prompt the switch to the high-speed connection, which in turn leads to greater internet use” (p. 17). Horrigan argues that those with more experience jump to broadband to engage in gaming, blogging, virtual tours, podcasting, VoIP, music downloads, and streaming audio and video. All of these things would be difficult, if not impossible, on a dial-up connection. Many of the activities involve a far greater range of communication and interactivity than just sending an email or downloading the instructions for a casserole. As the desire increases to use the internet for more advanced activities, internet service providers will see an increase in broadband customers. As the technology evolves, so too do activities change.

So what does this mean? Would not an increase in bandwidth simply be used for more content? No. Instead, content providers will use some of the extra bandwidth to offer new or more complex services. The greater bandwidth of the future will allow for a greater amount of information to be sent and received from the user. The World Wide Web as we know it will become far more interactive and progress to an era of virtual reality. As Chesebro has argued, “As a symbolic and cognitive communication technology, the Internet creates and fosters a different reality, a virtual reality, that dramatically changes how we understand or know, what we know, and the function of knowledge” (Chesebro, 2000, p. 8). This will allow users to participate fully in the flow of the information on the internet.

Exactly how users will fully immerse themselves in the new internet will not be guessed here. The manner and degree to which technology will advance in the future will be beyond anything that we really understand today. A vocabulary for such terms has yet to be developed, because the manner in which the activities exist has yet to be developed. No one correctly guessed what the internet would be in the late 1980s, even with the knowledge of government and educational networks available at the time. There are, however, clues as to which direction the internet will take. We can guess that the future holds far more interactivity, information processing, and electronic realism. We can theorize that the internet will be something more than just reading text and watching images on a computer screen. It is safe to say that the internet will fully immerse the user in ways that have not yet been made available. Instead of seeking to find what technological changes the internet will bring, our focus is on why people will partake and use a virtual social reality.

Internet Users’ Perplexity in the Virtual Social Reality

In The Construction of Social Reality, Searle argues that two worlds exist. One world is independent of us, the physical world that would be existent whether humans existed or not. He believes that there is “a distinction between facts dependent on us and those that exist independently of us” (p. 149). Searle makes a clear attempt in his work to separate the social world we create from the world that exists under the laws
of physics and nature. In the conclusion of the book, he summarizes his thoughts on language:

Certain sorts of sounds or marks count as words and sentences . . . The agentive function is that of representing, in one or other of the possible speech act modes, objects and states of affairs in the world. Agents who can do this collectively have the fundamental precondition of all other institutional structures: Money, property, marriage, government, and universities all exist by forms of human agreement that essentially involve the capacity to symbolize. (p. 228)

What if we supplant Searle’s ideas on language with electronic media, specifically the internet? What if web pages, HTML code, on-line games, interactive chat-rooms, streaming video, and everything else on the World Wide Web replaces Searle’s “sounds” in speech? They become the symbols of information, which is the structure of the virtual social reality. What if these symbols increase in their style, technological capability, interactivity, and, most importantly, their ability to represent the real world and deceive our five senses into believing in its validity? We then have a world that represents the reality completely dependent on humans, a virtual social reality.

Emotion as a User’s Drive and the Active Audience

The manipulation of a virtual social reality may take many directions and branch into almost limitless possibilities. Emotion is what will drive people to manipulate the medium of the internet. Emotion, as we know, can contain a myriad of topics. One of which is interpersonal communication, the desire to speak and relate information to each other. We are, after all, a social species. This drive is already apparent on the internet. As Norman has argued:

People who separated physically would often separate socially and emotionally as well. No more: today we can be in continual contact with friends and relatives no matter where we are, no matter the time of day. Today’s technology makes it possible to stay in touch with friends and family on a continual basis. Email, instant messaging, text messages, and voice mail have no barriers in time or distance. (p. 149)

Already this emotional drive to communicate has begun in electronic interpersonal communication. Norman further maintains: “People need to communicate continually, for comfort, for reassurance” (p. 15). The emotional drive to communicate has been and will continue to be a primary force in shaping the internet. As the technology increases, so too will this level of communication become more complex and more diverse. People will interact in new ways in the virtual social reality:

This technology creates a feeling of immersion: Viewers or players feel as if they are inside the virtual space, as if they are surrounded by it, similar to the way the natural world surrounds us in real life . . . Perhaps eventually, technology will be perfected to the point that one would not be able to distinguish between virtual reality and reality. (Banschick & Banschick in Shyles et al., 2003, p. 168)
In addition to new advances in emotional communication, the material and information being communicated will also change. Banschick and Banschick promote the idea “that the Internet blurs the traditional boundaries between buyer and seller, between product and service, and between tangibles and intangibles” (p. 162). So too will the lines blur between content producer and audience. In short, the audience also becomes producer of content and communication. In older forms of media, one person or group of people would produce a program, television show, film, or music to promote and extend an idea. They would communicate to a wide audience. This will not cease to exist. There will always be a Hollywood creating entertainment for the public.

However, audience members are no longer passively confined to their seats. They become active in viewing and even produce material themselves for others to consume. In the sphere of academia, Ramage sponsors the idea that the internet will help in the destruction of traditional publication: “Internet portals, Web sites, Web logs, and the like seem destined to eventually supplement, if not supplant, university presses and journals and academic libraries as the primary access points for ‘serious’ ideas” (p. 218). If this can happen in academic publishing, why could it not happen in other forms of communication and for other forms of information and entertainment?

Many home computers come equipped with video editing software. Users can edit short videos of any subject they see fit and place it on the internet. This was once too costly for the individual to do. The same can be said for writing books, creating and editing music, and 3D animation. All of these things are now in the realm of the user to create material, to communicate.

*The Virtual Social Reality: A Means to Find Success*

Along with the need to communicate, people will turn to the internet to satisfy their own emotional needs to achieve success, to accomplish something. This has already played out once. The “dot com boom” of the late 1990s was just such an exercise for society seeking success on the Internet. Seemingly overnight, hundreds if not thousands of internet businesses sprang into existence where none had been. Each business offered some new niche or service that was otherwise unavailable. I am suggesting that the internet allowed for a lowering of the barrier to entry—anybody could own a business and many did. Many people went to the web to start a business and achieve success. Many failed and thus the “dot com bust” early in this century. However, the few survivors who have made it big have become the contemporary version of the robber barons of the late nineteenth century.

People will also venture to the internet to satisfy areas of life that they have not satisfied in the past. The medium of the internet will also transform the values and the goals people have. As Searle states, “[V]ery few people would fall in love if they never read about it; and nowadays, we would have to add if they never saw it on television or in the movies” (p. 135). The expectations for success will change in correlation to internet use and connectivity. As people seek to find solace on the internet, so too will the demands of people change. People will be expected to update
a weblog, send email, provide home videos, make a podcast, and even maintain fictional characters on the web. The internet creates an entire new set of demands on people that are a reflection of human emotional needs and desires for success.

The Virtual Social Reality: An Identity Crisis

In addition to finding success and seeking to extend levels of communication, the internet will also feature individuals living lives built upon their own ideals. On the internet, one can change one’s identity and live a completely different life. Individuals will be able to create characters that live in a world that is entirely fictional, yet the characters become an extension of the user. Again, as technology increases, so too will the realism of the characters and the user’s experience. Chesebro posits:

As a symbolic and cognitive communication technology, the Internet creates and fosters a different kind of reality, a virtual reality, that dramatically changes how we understand or know, what we know, and the functions of knowledge . . . [A] virtual reality possesses some degree of vividness. As representational quality or the sensory appeal of the mediated environmental increases, a virtual reality becomes more vivid to individuals functioning within it. (2000, p. 10)

As with communication and the journey to find success, the creation of identity, or false identity, has already begun. We do not have to wait for the increase in information processing to see this already taking place. People can create characters and role-play in a variety of on-line gaming sites: “Role-playing allows children to experiment with different sides of their personalities, or to express a side of themselves that they do not usually express. They can adopt new traits and new personalities and try them out” (Banschick & Banschick in Shyles et al., 2003, p. 191).

Identity can also be recreated on-line: “Want a perfect body? It’s possible to have one, that is, a virtual body, online . . . The Internet could not have been a more perfect invention for addressing the desire to present a perfect body (that is, a perfect virtual body) to the world” (Magdoff & Rubin in Shyles et al., 2003, p. 209). This ability to change identity can be beneficial and potentially inhibitive to the development of the individual.

This will also allow for individuals to behave and experiment with things in a way that they would not normally do in reality. Furthermore, as technology increases so too will the realism of the on-line experience increase in realism: “[The internet] promotes both interaction and avoidance. And it offers unprecedented possibilities for the transformation of the self” (p. 218). In short, the internet provides users with the freedom to create themselves in any way in this virtual social reality. As technology becomes more complex, so too will the complexity and depth of virtual identity change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be hypothesized that the internet is on the cusp of a great transformation. As technology increases, the World Wide Web will become a virtual
social reality. This virtual world, because of the increase in technology, will represent the real world. However, being a digital medium, it can be manipulated in any manner the users desire. The manipulation will be driven by the emotional needs and desires of users; thus emotion is the key element of the new internet. The internet will become humanity’s source for finding love, escaping pain, searching for answers, religious belief, and anything else that emotion drives. This revolution may represent the greatest advantage for human communication since the advent of the printing press. It also contains the power to destroy the world in which we live today.

Note

[1] “We now stand on the threshold of the 21st century, which brings with it a shift as profound as that of the Industrial Revolution—a New Revolution propels us from an industrial to an informational age. One central and celebrated innovation responsible for this change is the computer, which has been affecting modern life in a myriad of ways as it transforms even those devices responsible for the last transition from an agrarian to an industrial world” (Shyles et al., 2003, p. 3)

References


