

Resonance

Fred Manskow Nymoen

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"Where's the wisdom we lost in knowledge,
and where's the knowledge we lost in information?"

T.S.Eliot

"Choruses from the Rock"

As a communication designer, I am in the business of creating structural and visual support for messages that are to be disseminated through a range of different media, from packaging and advertising to books, magazines and television, and, more recently, CD-ROMs and the World-Wide Web. In the history, theory and practice of this profession, along with the other professions that constitute mass media, the notion of communication as a mutual interchange has invariably been set aside in favour of a model that emphasizes the speaker over the listener—the writer over the reader. In these contexts, communication operates as a one-way activity, dealing with the transmittal of information rather than the exchange of meaning, an often predictable spectacle where the few address the many. Accordingly, communication design has had more to do with creating persuasive compositions of images and text than with facilitating dialogue.

The most obvious difference between a conversation and mediated communication lies in the physical and temporal proximity of speaker and listener. Where a conversation remains direct and interpersonal, taking place in real time as well as in real space, mediated communication can cross the boundaries of time and space through some form of medium. For the purpose of this discussion, media are those devices through which information passes on its way from a remote speaker to his or

her audience. With the exception of the telephone and certain aspects of the Internet, media are channels for some form of mass communication, from one sender to several recipients. The audience may consist of a series of individual encounters—say, those facilitated by a book or a site on the World-Wide Web—or it may be found in the simultaneity of a television broadcast.

In contrast to its predecessors, most notably the newspaper, television is an inherently spectacular form of mass communication, inviting an audience to watch rather than a public to participate. The physical relationship between the television set and its viewer—one a constant spew of sensory input, the other a reclining spectator—has created what I consider to be an unfortunate association between mass communication and recreation. This association, along with television's unprecedented penetration, has affected the way in which both viewers and programmers approach its throughput, resulting in a general change in our culture's attitude towards the processes of communication, information, meaning, and knowledge. In a recent Congress debate concerning the relationship between the government and the media, a conservative lawmaker argued that there was no reason for the government to be involved in the business of *entertainment*. No longer primarily a source for meaningful information, mass media have become a ubiquitous stimulus. At the same time as the boundaries between critical editorial content, advertising, and entertainment are being blurred, the ownership structures that support the media are becoming similarly intertwined, with media ownership consolidated to few, extremely powerful entities.

The question of whether mediated communication can produce meaningful discourse has been subject to inquiry and controversy ever since Socrates refused the pen in favor of the spoken word, and it has become the object of increased concern when we now embrace the Internet as the next step in the inevitable evolution of mass communication. This essay reflects an attempt to combine certain contemporary theories of communication, interaction and interpretation with creative opportunities generated by advances in communication technology to generate a digital, editorial environment

where the content provided forms the basis for discussion among its readers. Although I acknowledge the role of advertising in the media marketplace, I have chosen to deal exclusively with critical, editorial content, both in the essay and in the project prototype. Accordingly, my discussion of the interrelationship between information, interpretation and meaning does not concern itself with how we interpret advertising or entertainment. It does, however, take the interrelationships between these different categories into account when they have affected the quality and integrity of editorial content.

"Just when we think that information is producing meaning,
it is doing the exact opposite."

Jean Baudrillard

"In The Shadow of the Silent Majority"

Jean Baudrillard's observation brings into question an assumption that has permeated the discourse surrounding the emerging information economy—the assumption that easier access to more information will, as a matter of course, lead to a more knowledgeable public. He goes so far as to posit that information and meaning may be mutually exclusive, citing, among other factors, the way media saturation and public complacency appear to go hand in hand. I welcome Baudrillard's scepticism as an antidote to the relentless info-centricism of the proponents of the information economy, but I am not ready to accept his observation as an a priori truth. Rather, I would argue that our culture's apparent inability to turn information into meaning has to do with our culture's emphasis on mere access to information over our ability to extract meaning from that information.

Although it falls short of declaring information and meaning incompatible, the latter point-of-view acknowledges that the relationship between them is far from linear. Indeed, it maintains that information, in the words of Michael Heim, "presupposes a significant context but does not deliver or guarantee one."¹ Take, as an example, a news report concerning the possibility of a link between 'mad cow disease'

in cattle and a similar ailment in human beings. According to this argument, the nature of the meaning inferred from this piece of information will depend on a range of variables. Of these, some are contained within the information and the manner in which it is transmitted, while others—the ones that ultimately determine the nature of the inferred meaning—reside within the mind of the individual listener. As a vegetarian, I am likely to infer a very different meaning than what a person who just enjoyed a steak will, even though we may have received the exact same account of the phenomenon from exactly the same source. These determining factors include, but are not limited to, our previous experience and knowledge of the subject matter, our upbringing, the particularities of the situation within which we received the information, and its direct implication on our own life. All these variables, roughly equivalent to what Heidegger described as the forestructure we bring to an act of communication, affect, to some degree, what we eventually infer from the information we receive. Upon interpretation, the meaning implied by the content and context of the information itself is modified by the listener, who uses his or her forestructure to extract an understanding—an inferred meaning—from the information. I will probably sit back and smugly denounce the futility of a carnivorous lifestyle, whereas my friend may —————

If we follow this train of thought, the problem of meaning in mass media is more than a question of the viability of mediated communication as such. Rather, it becomes a question of our culture's attitude towards what mass communication puts forward. In "Choruses from The Rock," T.S. Eliot bemoans the knowledge we lost in information. I take this to mean that we, by confusing the one for the other, are overestimating the importance of information at the expense of its most important attribute—its ability to inform our construction of knowledge. Information is not the same as knowledge. As long as we consider it to be, our opportunity to use it constructively diminishes. In mass media, and particularly in those instances where the constant interference of advertising disrupts any attempt at interpretive activity,

information is reduced to the compact form of the factoid, a consolidated summary from which little relevant meaning can be inferred. Communicators argue that this reduction of available interpretive paths is the result of a trade-off between the complexity and impact of the message, a trade-off necessitated by increasing demands on the audience's time and imagination, as well as by the advertiser's demand that the content must appeal to the lowest common denominator. By boiling a complex interrelationship of facts, events and allegations down to a one-sentence factoid, they claim to capture the essence of the occurrence in a form that is as easy to understand as it is to see. The the problem with this kind of pseudo-information is best expressed by Ben Bagdikian. In "The Media Monopoly", his account of the consolidation of media ownership, Bagdikian argues that "unchallenged information is inherently flawed information."² Information that can't resonate against a different viewpoint or, at the very least, against a thorough account of its own contextual relationships, is not likely to be particularly informative. Mass media, whenever it thus emphasizes a prescribed meaning over a series of possible interpretive paths, fails to deliver information that informs.

In his introduction to "Critical Terms for Literary Study," Professor Thomas McLaughlin sums up the challenge of constructing meaning from mediated communication: "Thinking about literature as writing also entails a commitment to the active and productive role of interpretation. As writing, literature is implicated in systems of language and culture that open it to the work of reading. Recent theory has emphasized the work of the reader who actuates the potential meanings made possible by the text and by the interpretive practices through which the reader works."³ Even though the communication in this case is mediated by a text rather than being directly personal, and even though the text's ability to receive feedback from its reader is symbolic, the process through which the reader infers meaning from the text is dialogic. In and of itself, the text may be an impermeable body, but its ability to communicate depends on its ability to open itself up to interpretation. Rather than

being an end in itself, the information provided by the text becomes the means by which the reader constructs meaning according to his own forestructure.

In "Paralogic Rhetoric," Thomas Kent traces the origins of a theory of communicative interaction, the theory upon which my own design principle is based, to Nietzsche's contention that knowledge is made—a product of human communicative interaction—rather than discovered. Kent then draws a line of reasoning through the work of Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Davidson, an argumentation that places interpretation at the center, and moves information off to the side. In its simplest form, this theory requires active participation of both speaking and listening parties in order for communication to occur. It rejects the notion that communication embodies a direct transmission of experience, opinion or anticipation from one person to another, and holds that knowledge exists, not as an external absolute waiting to be discovered, but that it comes into being through social interaction mediated by *language in use*.

Language in use differs from structuralism's conception of language as system through its description of the interpretive guesswork we partake in when we engage in communicative interaction. In short, both speaker and listener make assumptions before and during the course of an utterance. While the listener attempts to interpret what the speaker is saying, the speaker attempts to predict how the statement is likely to be interpreted once it has been uttered. In a conversation, information about the likely and actual interpretations flow back and forth aided by questions, gesture, and vocal inflection. All the while, statements are checked for accuracy against individual observations of the subject matter, the process Donald Davidson calls triangulation:

... each of two people is reacting differently to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. If we project the incoming lines outward, their intersection is the common cause. If the two people now note each other's reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. The common cause

can now determine the contents of an utterance or a thought. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete.⁴

We need, in other words, to obtain knowledge about our own mind, about someone else's mind, and about the world we share and refer to. Moreover, these three forms of knowledge must line up to form a triangle in order for communicative interaction to occur. When the utterance "tree" and the interpretation "tree" align with the same object or concept in the world, we have a schematic example of communicative interaction.

Unless we are in the irritating habit of stating the obvious, the concepts we deal with when we communicate are of such a nature that direct triangulation such as described above becomes difficult, if not impossible. In practice, we have no guarantee that the meaning inferred corresponds directly with the meaning implied, since our knowledge of the object or concept we refer to has been subject to earlier interpretive activity, and hence subject to evaluation according to our individual preferences and prejudices. As an example, consider the term 'affirmative action.' In and of itself, this combination of words allude to some form of behavior in support or favor of someone or something. Since it is part of a particular legislative initiative, it also has a very specific, legally defined meaning. Due to the current controversy surrounding the legislation that bears its name, 'affirmative action' has become the conveyor of additional layers of meaning, each one corresponding with a particular point of view. Although these different layers of meaning may have little to do with the legislation itself, the term can no longer be used without referring, by implication, to the different social phenomena it is said to be responsible for or associated with. Any usage of these words will generate a range of reactions that may or may not convey the true, legal meaning of the terminology or the intentions of the speaker. Where the speaker means "levelling out the playing field," the listener may just as well hear "reverse discrimination." Both, as it happens, are gross oversimplifications of the term, the

legislation and its effects. These kinds of intentions and reactions, instrumental in our interpretation of the utterance, depend on our own socio-political situation and attitude—on our forestructure.

In this example, the key to the meaning of the utterance, once the information within it has been conveyed, is found within interpretation. Thomas Kent explains that “communicative interaction—which allows concepts, beliefs and knowledge to come into being—depends [...] on our ability to interpret the language of others and others’ abilities to interpret our language, for without interpretation—the ability to get close enough to an understanding that will satisfy both our intentions and beliefs and someone else’s—there can be no communication, no mental states, no thought, no beliefs, and no truth. Interpretation, then, goes all the way down.”⁵

(Note: I am currently reading Eco’s “The Limits of Interpretation” and Bakhtin’s “The Dialogic Imagination” in order to balance out the discussion with some cautionary words regarding the workings and limitations of interpretation. When this section is completed, I want it to point towards the importance of a specific, finite context as the ideal playing-ground for interpretation)

The personal computer’s re-entry into the arena in the capacity of a medium, spearheaded by CD-ROMs and by increased public access to the Internet, has created a kind of mediated communication frequently labeled “interactive media.” Since I employ the word ‘interaction’ to a slightly different end, I have chosen to use the term ‘computer-mediated communication’ when describing these media. Computer-mediated communication is said to make the readers—or ‘users’—more directly and actively involved in the process of authoring their own reading experiences. I see immediate parallels between this development and Kent’s insistence that interaction must be the cornerstone of meaningful, productive readership. On closer examination, however, we find that most interactive media define interaction as being the same as navigation,

only slightly different than the changing of channels on a television set. Readers make decisions pertinent to emphasis and sequence, they can interrupt, backtrack and change tracks with a mouse click, all without exercising significant influence on the rhetoric of the presentation. Thus, when I navigate through the computer-generated renderings of early 60' Greenwich Village in Bob Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited CD-ROM, I am on a carefully scripted guided tour rather than a personal quest. The aspects of Dylan's life and art that I find the most interesting may not even be included in the presentation.

The market is cluttered with 'guided tour' CD-ROMS. Of these, the most successful ones are those where the navigation has become an integral part of the presentation, as potentially meaningful as the material you navigate through. In "Myst," the clues needed to solve the riddle are discovered by wandering around the island, slowly putting together a scenario by associating forms and functions with the traces left by the authors. Navigation, then, is more than simply a question of going from one body of information to another. It carries the potential of meaning within itself. The juxtaposition of where you have been and where you are going becomes more meaningful than either 'place' in isolation. When navigating such scripted environments, a user has no opportunity to step outside the paths made possible by the author. The options provided can be described as rhetorical devices intended to operate in the same way as any other persuasive element of an argument. These *binary syllogisms* serve to reinforce rather than to question the premise of the presentation. For the purposes of creating certain kinds of products, this is not an altogether bad definition of interactivity. When compared, however, to Kent's description of the role of interpretation *within* interaction in the construction of knowledge, it still leaves much to be desired. Instead of emerging in response to the reader's specific interpretation, the interaction is as carefully scripted as the rest of the presentation. It has, in a sense, been separated from interpretation.

Taking the fundamentals of the theory of communicative interaction into account—that knowledge is made and not discovered, that all communication involves interaction, which in turn hinges on interpretation—an interactive environment should be one where the reader's interpretation of what is being put forward is reflected in the consecutive interaction. In other words, it should be an environment that yields to the reader. In such environments, interaction is anticipated and facilitated by its structure and design, but instigated and directed by the reader. The piece itself remains 'open', like the subject matter of a panel discussion, to the dynamics of reaction, interpretation and interaction, and it grows and changes along with the reader. As witnessed by earlier references to the role of the reader in the interpretation of literary texts, the computer is hardly the only place where this kind of work can be generated. It does, however, have a benefit in that it is well established as a versatile tool. To my mind, one of the keys to the successful development of computer-mediated communication lies in our ability to retain and take advantage of the computer's capabilities as a tool when turning it into a medium. This latter point may be emphasized further by referring to McLaughlin's description of reading as 'work,' a contention that resonates throughout recent critical theory, finding particular relevance in computer-mediated communication.

In order to understand how such an architecture would operate, and how it would differ from existing manifestations of interactive media, I would like to point to Umberto Eco's discussion of 'the work in movement' in "The Poetics of the Open Work." Eco begins, in agreement with the generation of critics that he represents, by arguing that "every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself,"⁶ and that it thus contains "an indefinite reserve of meanings."⁷ He then describes a range of different manifestations of openness, discussing the work of Joyce, Mallarmé, and Brecht, before arriving at the following conclusion:

The possibilities which the work's openness makes available always work within a given field of relations. As in the Einsteinian universe, in the 'work in movement' we may well deny that there is a single prescribed point of view. But this does not mean complete chaos in its internal relations. What it does imply is an organizing rule which govern these relations. Therefore, to sum up, we can say that the work in movement is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation.⁸

Although Eco wrote this in 1959, as an approach to avant garde jazz, theatre and literature, his notion of the work in movement bears striking resemblance to what computer-mediated communication may be able to facilitate. To my mind, it points in the direction of a possible definition of the role of the communication designer in this new media landscape, a role more akin to the moderator than to the persuasive advocate.

The environment Eco describes is at once open and contained. It is open in that it does not prescribe a single point of view, contained in that its openness is contextualized by a "given field of relations." Such environments ought to provide "the possibility of numerous different interventions," through providing ample opportunity for the reader to do his interpretive work. At the same time, the environment should constitute a framework—"an organizing rule"—providing context to that interpretation. I believe this balance to be crucial. In my own project, an editorial environment where the content serves as a basis for discussion, the exchanges that take place are required to be relevant to the content provided. Should the framework generated by this requirement fall away, the environment could very easily be reduced to rubble by chaotic interference. If, on the other hand, the reader's ability to examine various aspects of that content was to be reduced to a series of predetermined options, we would be left with the less than satisfactory definition of interaction outlined earlier.

I have frequently used the metaphor of a moderated conversation as an example of how I envision such an environment to operate. As is the case with Eco's work in movement, the openness of a moderated conversation is contextualized by a specific framework. This framework consists in part of the generally accepted protocol of debate, in part of the subject matter, the debaters and the moderator. When it works correctly, this framework ensures that the debate remains true to itself, that it doesn't stray from its predetermined purpose—the subject matter. It does so without infringing on the participants' ability to express themselves and their relevant viewpoints. A conclusion may be desirable, but whether it will emerge and what form it will take remains contingent upon the dynamics of the discussion itself.

Contrast this to the loose framework provided by a casual, unmoderated conversation, which does little to prevent indiscriminate interference. Such interference may indeed be the lifeblood of the casual chat; the sudden burst of inspiration that can send it off in an unexpected direction. The casual chat may go anywhere, depending on the whim of the participants. Since there is no overriding principle, no explicit purpose outside of the social aspects of communication for its own sake, a conclusion seems unlikely, even undesirable. The purpose of such conversations is not to solve problems or shed light on specific issues. It is, simply, to converse. Although I would be the first to sing the praises of such spirited, spontaneous elucidations, I would be hard pressed to find within it the model for a meaningful computer-mediated discourse.

I make this distinction in order to differentiate between what I would consider to be an editorial environment, an environment that provides a specific context for a particular kind of conversation, and a service that would offer its participants an opportunity to converse without establishing a contextual framework for their conversation. There is an abundance of such services already on the Internet. A few are profoundly important, primarily as venues for groups that have been disenfranchised by mainstream media's relentless pursuit of the lowest common denominator. Most are chaotic, exclusive, and without interest to the outsider, which

may, incidentally, be part of the purpose of their existence. Some are even labeled 'moderated', which simply means that someone is reading what is being typed and will expell anyone who may be expressing themselves in ways deemed inappropriate by the service provider.

I am the first to acknowledge the many problems associated with our overreliance on predigested information, but I object strongly to what I consider to be an implied parallel between the presence of a moderator and the practice of censorship. Unfortunately, this particular oversimplification has become a commonplace in the debate about freedom of expression on the Internet, where the mantra 'information wants to be free' is used to sanction everything from outright theft of private and official data to the call for the end of the editor. According to this argument, the absence of the editor would give the reader the freedom to determine what information to consider and what to disregard, based exclusively on his or her forestructure.

(Note: This section will be expanded and rewritten, with a reference back to my discussion of "The Limits of Interpretation", to be completed over break)

I would argue that all information really wants is to be contextualized, and that the only people who are qualified to do that are those who do it for a living—the editors. To argue that a web browser and Internet access is all a reader needs in order to replace the editor is to argue that owning a piano makes him a composer. The good editor, knowing that I am going to require qualitative discourse, will spend entire working days and excessive personal, technological, and financial resources examining the available sources, until he has generated an adequate representation of the occurrence or concept and its contextual relationships. The notion of a public composed entirely of independently informed readers may be a compelling ideal, but it fails to consider that few would have the time to filter through massive amounts of data just

to determine what is relevant and what is not, or that—in the eventuality that they did have the time—they would probably not be very good at it. So far, I remain unconvinced that a programmed ‘intelligent agent’ can do the work nearly as good as an editor whose judgment I trust, albeit sceptically. When I choose an editor, through my decision to purchase one magazine or newspaper over another or to listen to one radio talk show over another, I purchase a context, a particular way to view particular events or concepts. This context—the framework for my interpretation—may be incomplete or biased, depending on the qualities and opinions of its editor, as well as on my awareness of their impact on his work. Nonetheless, the presence of an editor provides one half of the requirement of the work in movement; the field of relations that govern the reader’s interpretive activity.

(Note: To follow—an account of how Resonance would be edited, as well as a discussion of how it implements the second requirement of the “work in movement”, the ability to make numerous personal interventions.)

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- 1 Michael Heim: *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 10
 - 2 Ben Bagdikian: *The Media Monopoly*, Fourth Edition, Beacon Press, 1992, p xxvi
 - 3 Thomas McLaughlin and Frank Lentricchia (Ed.): *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Second Edition, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 6
 - 4 Donald Davidson, *Three Varieties of Knowledge*, in *A.J. Ayer Memorial Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p 159
 - 5 Thomas Kent: *Paralogic Rhetoric*, Bucknell University Press 1993, pp. 117-118
 - 6 Umberto Eco: *The Role of the Reader*, Indiana University Press, 1979, p.49
 - 7 Umberto Eco: *The Role of the Reader*, Indiana University Press, 1979, p.54
 - 8 Umberto Eco: *The Role of the Reader*, Indiana University Press, 1979, p.62