On Building a New Ethical Model for a New Medium

Luke Andrews, #3976114

COMS 453/4: Communication Ethics

Professor Dennis Murphy

April 10, 2000

LONG AGO, A PRESCIENT COMMUNICATION THEORIST NOTED THAT WHEN NEW MEDIA hatch out of their shell, fresh to the world, they tend to look and sound a lot like their parents, the old media. Marshall McLuhan was a prodigy of the television age, and his pithy thought on the subject ("The content of a new medium is always an old medium," for the record) was perhaps an observation on television's dependency on radio. This dependency has naturally lessened as television producers gradually grow more sophisticated and better understand their medium—today we have music videos and experimental documentaries that challenge the relationship between audience, image and sound in ways that seem nothing at all like radio. Yet the dependency nevertheless remains; no better example exists than television news with its stiff, immobile anchors and often irrelevant video footage that seems to do little more than fill visual space.

Here in 2000, McLuhan would no doubt find it unsurprising that another new medium, the seemingly ubiquitous World Wide Web, has had trouble escaping its older cousins. This no shocking revelation, of course—it seems one can hardly open the newspaper or turn on the television without a deluge of commentary and predictions on this new information age. How we will live in smart homes connected to the Internet through our toasters and television sets. How employees waste company time browsing Web sites at the office. More seriously, commentators have begun looking at ethical problems with the medium—how our privacy is threatened by this new sea of data and "e-commerce," for example.

I have little doubt that some of this crystal ball gazing will prove relevant as the medium grows and develops. Yet I have an even stronger sense that the large bulk of it will prove to be entirely useless once the Web makes more concrete steps at defining itself as a *unique* medium. So many people discuss, in Brave New World tones, how the Web is an exciting new medium. So few remark on how McLuhan's observation (one might even call it a warning) might apply equally to the Web as it has to other media. My own experience as a Web site designer, augmented by four years of communication studies, has informed me that what my colleagues and I create are frequently no more than books, pamphlets and magazines on a screen. Clients routinely request Web sites and then offer their catalogue or company brochure as the content. Companies searching for incentive to build Web sites see them for online shopping and low-cost information distribution. Mail order catalogues and a bit of money saved on ink and paper does not a new medium make. Furthermore, as far as I can tell, from my own observation, the audience of this new medium has found little reason to complain. Maybe it is the still-fresh "gee-whiz" glamour of new technology, but the world has so far embraced the amazon.com model of new media.

In approaching the ultimate topic of this essay—a discussion of ethics for this new medium—it is this last point which gives me greatest pause. For it strikes me that trying to construct or even discuss an ethical paradigm for the Web is akin to thinking a dam built on a highway might reduce the flow of traffic the same way it reduces the flow of water. I do not believe that we, as producers or as audience, yet understand this medium, this *information* highway, well enough to write the book on it.

This is a medium whose authors, like me, have yet to find their own voice. Some, like their television-producing cousins before them, have realized this and are pressing for change. *A List Apart* (http://www.alistapart.com/) is a Web digest for Web site

designers that attempts to raise issues which move past the usual discussion of technical concerns and artistic merit. In an article entitled, "A Dao of Web Design" (http://www.alistapart.com/stories/dao/), one designer, John Allsopp, argues that many of the technical problems that plague designers (making a Web site "look good" on different versions of Netscape, Internet Explorer on Macintosh or Windows computers, for example) are a result of applying a print model of design, in which designers expect complete stylistic control over what their audience sees. When one reads a book or flips through a magazine, the design and content are static, dictated by the designer to the audience. Even a brief flirtation with the Web suggests an entirely different relationship between designer and audience: not every computer has the same size monitor, the same software installed or the same fonts available. Rather than embrace this unique relationship, most Web site designers fight it, attempting by any means possible to *force* their design on their audience. Allsopp's argument is that this should stop, that designers should recognize the democratic nature of this medium, that they ought to appreciate the power the Web gives to its audience. The most frequent example trotted out by advocates like Allsopp is the person with poor eyesight who struggles with the morning newspaper yet can increase the size of text on the Web with a single click.

I have difficulty arguing with Allsopp or his like-minded colleagues. His ideas represent the sort of paradigm shift I see necessary if we are to use the Web as a unique medium. At the same time, though, I would argue that he gives the Web audience too much credit. I suggested above that Web site users seem to have no more expectations of Web sites than most companies; they marvel at the ability to shop online or check their school grades from the comfort of their own computer. In other words, I believe that audiences are just as caught in the Web-as-print model of communication. Of course the television news anchor illustration suggests that the Web will always reproduce print in some respects, but I also believe that the Web will yet find aims, its own proverbial music videos, that capitalize on its unique strengths and capabilities. It thus becomes my responsibility, as I see it, to determine what these possibilities are, to anticipate and articulate the relationship between these new products and my audience, and to recognize the ethical implications within.

To reconcile an ethical model, it is vital to recognize first what demarcates a Web audience as opposed to a television audience or print audience. Despite any tendency to view Web content as glorified print, one still approaches the Web with different motivations and different expectations. It is a fundamentally different sort of activity, owing to the high interaction between audience and content. In fact, rarely does anyone refer to a Web "audience" at all, but frequently to "users" or, more idiomatically, "surfers." The surfing motif at first glance seems silly, but it is a suitable metaphor. The Web offers an unceasing tide of information, but it takes considerable skill and a certain fortitude to conquer it, to "stay afloat." The discourse it seems is ahead of the producers. Unlike the person who casually flips through a magazine, or aimlessly hops television channels, the Web user usually takes a very active role in seeking content. We use directories and search engines to search for specific information, and must summon some measure of cunning to actually generate useful results. This is not like print—when we turn the page of a magazine, its contents confront us whether we ask them to or not. The hierarchical, hyperlink dependent nature of Web sites puts far more

control in the mind of the audience, not only as to whether the page will be "turned," but indeed which page among many to turn, since inevitably most Web pages will have myriad links.

This sort of audience power adds new wrinkles to an ethical consideration. On the one hand, there is a shift from the linear format of print to the parallel format of hypertext. One may navigate through ideas in three dimensions; the thought process may flow down, up and sideways simultaneously. This is a model that I would argue compares much more closely to our own jumbled thought process, which never seems to run straight. The slightest smell may interrupt one thought and flood one with an unexpected memory; so too may one word hyperlink to a seemingly unrelated idea. The author arguably has more flexibility in presenting ideas, without being tied to one narrative which flows from A to B. Such freedom seems attractive—indeed it is what attracts me to the medium. Yet it also comes with a price. Hundreds of years of education to read and write in linear fashion cannot but have left its mark on humanity. Thus the association between the Web and print is particularly troubling: if we see a Web site as an electronic book, it ignores the altogether different structure of presentation. By challenging the linear flow of ideas, I am also challenging my audience to do the same. I must count on them to make the same lateral leaps, and to appreciate when I interrupt one unfinished idea with another. Furthermore, I must hope that they *choose* to do so, since the audience also has the power to not follow the thought at all.

Suppose one makes a controversial or offensive statement on a Web site to attract attention, just as one might use a splashy headline in a newspaper or show a disturbing image on a television program. Even with the intention to later refute the statement, there is a notable risk that the audience will never comprehend the refutation if they fail to find the appropriate link, or simply choose not to click it. This is not to suggest that the author ought to play it safe, to avoid controversy over fear of misunderstanding. Rather, it is to highlight the shift in responsibility in this model of communication. The author offers a challenge to the audience to respond in a certain way, but it is much less certain than in more traditional media that the audience will do so. A skillful documentary filmmaker can rhetorically "force" the audience to comprehend a certain perspective, though not necessarily to adopt it. The Web site author, however, not only cannot force the audience to adopt a perspective, but cannot even guarantee they will comprehend it to begin with.

Using print as a model for the Web also presents problems in the use of written text. Books can exploit a certain degree of liberty of space to explain ideas in full. Readers are accustomed to the narrative conventions of paragraphs and chapters through which an author can flesh out complex ideas. Web sites seem to have lost this liberty. Every experience I have had browsing Web sites and all the observations I have made of others doing the same suggests that we are completely unforgiving to text on the Web. We expect a crisp concision of ideas and a uniform economy of words. We scan longer paragraphs of text to find key ideas, or worse, scroll past them completely. The notion of spending an hour to read the contents of one Web site, as we might read one book, seems positively absurd. When Steven King exclusively published a work online recently, it was only a fraction of the length of his normal novels. How can a medium which is dominated by text be so non-conducive to reading? Despite the technological improvements that have graced computer monitors in recent years, I

would still suggest that the harshness of the screen tires our eyes like no piece of paper. I know no end of people who print all the e-mail they deem important, and who print Web pages from which they want to remember information.

The challenge that I offer myself is to overcome this obstacle to representation of ideas. I believe it is important to wage arguments that will encourage my audience to think and react; I want them to use their power as Web site browsers, to exercise the democracy of the medium. I must exercise my words in a way that overcomes my audience's fear of verbal intricacy. Design and style must augment ideas in a manner which makes a closer and more intensive reading both desirable and simple. More importantly, however, an education process must begin, by which I, as an author, teach my audience to see the Web as a medium of communication that flows bi-directionally. In the future, as the Web continues to displace other media as the vehicle of choice for corporate and personal communication, it will be incumbent upon Web users to maturely accept and sort through more complex information or face missing information completely.

Such a thought raises a key ethical concern for the years ahead. If the Web shifts from being an alternative, secondary communication medium to being the primary source of certain information, will the demands that I have discussed be simply too difficult to overcome for some users? Computer literacy is almost taken for granted now, despite the fact that a large portion of people does not have the necessary skills. What will happen when those skills are even more vital? Will older people, who have not received the same measure of computer training, find themselves on the communication fringe? Furthermore, while many companies see the Web as a means to cut the costs of information dissemination, in a certain respect, what in fact often occurs is that the audience absorbs those costs instead. A major philosophy behind electronic communication is the "de-papering" of the world; my own experience suggests that it is in fact merely created a redundancy as people continue to print their electronic documents anyhow. The money saved on ink and paper by the company is money spent by the audience. When people call the Web more democratic, this is perhaps not what they had in mind, and yet it is undeniably a more "equal" sharing of cost and responsibility.

With this in mind, one must ask if this shift will also unfairly put certain people at a communication disadvantage. A computer, a connection to the Internet, and the skills to make use of them are all expensive commodities. Someday perhaps the computer will be both as commonplace and as affordable as a television set is now, but that is certainly not the case today. It is thus apparent to me that an important concern for authors and audience alike is one more fundamental than questions surrounding comprehension and choice—that of media access. If my client or I choose to present information exclusively on the Web, will we unfairly and unethically exclude certain components of the audience? In a recent experience in my employment as a Web site designer, I confronted this problem. While producing a site for Concordia University's Department of Human Resources, I had to determine the best method to serve some important but extremely lengthy documents to the audience. The solution was to use Adobe Acrobat software to electronically publish them, and suggest that the audience download Acrobat Reader, a program freely available on Adobe's Web site. However, even in the first initial testing, many people seemed unable or unwilling to install

Acrobat. At what point does it become acceptable to leave those people behind? It seems that the prevailing thought process among Web site managers and producers is "when they are no longer a significant number." But if the document in question is a collective agreement, as some of these are, is it fair to leave out even an "insignificant" minority? As the Web leaves its formative years and adopts a more custom place in society, we must maintain concern and awareness over this problem.

The Web presents some significant challenges for the author. Anyone concerned with how their ideas are perceived, and indeed, if they are perceived at all, obviously must be concerned with not only the strengths of the medium, and how to exploit them, but also the less apparent weaknesses, and how to overcome them. But as we have seen, the most crucial challenges will doubtless fall upon the audience. The Web puts an altogether unique and different spin on the relationship between author and audience. The audience has a more "democratic" role to play, in which he or she must actively participate in the reception of information, not only by choosing particular information, but also by being frequently the one who finds it in the first place. For the author, this can obviously be a source of frustration—how does one ensure one's ideas are communicated? At the same time though, in constructing an ethical model, one must recognize that much of the communicative responsibility now lies in the lap of the audience. If there is vital information for the audience, they must often know where to look for it. To get the same brochure they were once offered for free, they must now own a computer, lease a connection to the Internet, and perhaps afford a printer, ink and paper.

When discussing traditional ethical concerns, this sort of realization offers an unattractive dam in the flow of ideas. On some level, it seems that audience now has an ethical responsibility to be informed, and that somehow it is no longer the author's concern. Some Web site authors do indeed take this position, offering excuses such as, "If my audience can't bother to upgrade its software, then they don't deserve to receive the information." I, however, would argue otherwise. Rather, because the Web is still in the process of development, I would suggest that there is merely another responsibility to the author, above and beyond the normal concerns of any media author, and that is to somehow incorporate education and "medium training" within our work. To truly construct ethical representations, one must ensure that the audience is informed of the skills they need to successfully communicate through the medium, or at the very least, that they are at least aware of the need for those skills. Today, I do not believe that Web users are *ready* to accept the responsibility so many Web authors are eager to give them. Only when they do can the medium work naturally and seamlessly, within an ethical framework, as other media do today.