

Sweetlemon

**Refresh Day – Brands are social actors**

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## Abstract

Experience design can be thought of the melding of understandings generated by interaction design on the one hand, and marketing on the other. It is a powerful combination that has advanced our understanding of how to craft both products and messages that are relevant to individuals. As long as the media mix was dominated by mass channels, using the individual as the primary lens made sense. But with the rising importance of social media we need to recast experience in a more explicitly social frame, especially brand experience.

## New Media

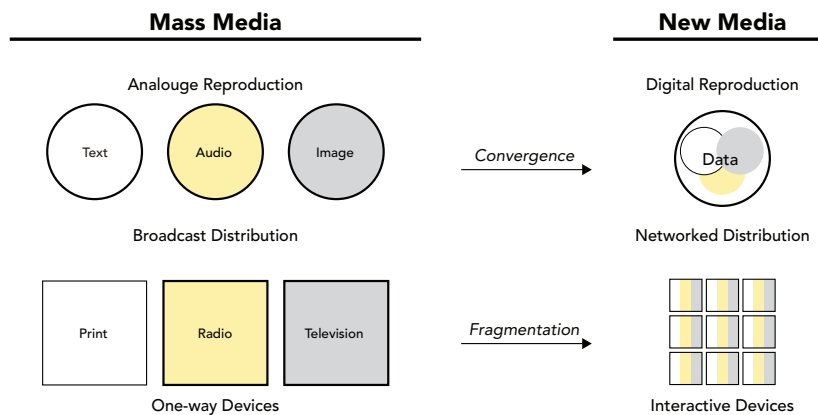
We have heard a lot today about significant and rapid changes in the media landscape. Changes that are having an impact on pretty much everything and everyone, not just our businesses. Sometimes we complain that some people just “don’t get it”. But tell the truth I don’t think anyone really “get’s it” it’s too big and too complicated.

At root this shift is being driven by changes in technology. Those technical developments have in turn have made new kinds media possible. Until recently, the media landscape was relatively stable, the last major arrival being television. Television was the last big innovation in what I’m going to lump together as mass media, the first being printing. That grouping may seem a bit coarse, but it brings forward what I want to highlight. That compared to everything that preceded it, the current shift in media represents a difference in kind, not just one more channel in the mix. Just pause for a moment and reflect – New media have arrived. New media don’t just appear every day. In this instance I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that it’s been 500 years since a shift in the media landscape of this magnitude has happened.

Technically speaking it is a shift from mechanical to digital reproduction coupled with networked communications. Sounds innocuous enough. But for media companies and the advertisers they depend on it is a radical change in the economy of media production. Now while this technical picture illuminates some of the challenges we face, it really just scratches the surface. Cross-media is difficult not just to organize, manage and execute; it’s difficult to understand. We still need to do some serious thinking not just about our craft and business models but about the way we understand what is going on around us.

What I want to do today is to look at the situation not through a technical or even primarily through a business frame but through a social frame. No doubt many of us are pretty tired of hearing about the social, it has become one of our buzzwords. But as a buzzword we use it as a category. We have social applications, like Facebook or social features like commenting. I want to talk about social not as a category, but as a frame, a way to structure understanding.

The individual is one of the most dominant frames we use to understand the world. Not too surprising, our experience is bound in our individual personhood. There is nothing wrong with using the notion of the individual as a frame. Indeed, the notion of the social isn’t coherent without it. I’m not going to claim that we need to abandon the individual frame, but I do claim that we need to rebalance our emphasis. I think the mass media economy is one of those contexts.



This may seem like a bit of a strange claim, demographics, target markets, audiences and such are all part of the daily trade. But markets and audiences, masses if you will, just cast social groups as undifferentiated collections of individuals.

As long as we maintain the mass mentality it is difficult to see social implications that emerge. Even the more purely technical aspects of the shift require a social frame to understand. For instance that people tend to unconsciously invoke a social frame just by using interactive media.

## Interaction and Social Norms

Say what you like about Clippy, in his day he represented the fruits of cutting edge research. Clippy grew out of a line of inquiry that suggested users had a strong tendency to treat their computers like other people rather than just objects. That is people apply social norms, like politeness, to interactive media.

On the face of it it sounds absurd, right? I mean how can you mistake a computer for a human? But it's not that we confuse computers and people. It's that when we interact with computers we tend to fall back on behaviors that come out of the social sphere.

Anyway, if you find yourself a bit skeptical about the claim you're not alone. Most of the people I've mentioned this too give me a sideways glance. And at the time the research came out it was met mostly with indignation. Common wisdom at the time was to avoid anything that might imply the machine had agency. Messages appearing on screen were written in awkward passive constructions to avoid the computer having a first person voice. Many icon designers of the day insisted that you should never use hands or faces.

But observations involving simple text based interfaces showed otherwise so Clippy's designers took the opposite strategy. Instead of trying to hide the apparent agency of the computer, why not work with it and expose it to users. Hence the Microsoft Help Agent. In retrospect Clippy seems perhaps a bit too literal an application of the idea. Although to be fair, in the lab the approach tested fairly well. As we all know, Clippy was a wretched failure as a product. Likely doing significant damage to Microsoft's brand in the process. But before you conclude that the failure of Clippy as a product equates to a failure of the underlying idea, think again.

Clippy's failure as a product actually argues for rather than against the idea that interactive media are somehow social. Mention Clippy and the reaction is never neutral. It's always a strong reaction, usually intense dislike. Why is the reaction so strong? Because Clippy is a social failure – he appears uninvited, he's pushy and is seemingly oblivious to what you're doing. Imagine being cornered by Clippy at a party.

When Microsoft finally killed the help agent last year, some people actually missed it, really it's true. But usually it was the dog character they missed. Interesting, recall the underlying application is the same, so it asks the same questions at the same moments. This difference becomes more understandable when we focus on the social aspects of the technology. I'm speculating here, but I think this is not because the dog is cuter, but rather because it's a dog. Dogs have a firm place in the human social order, so it slots in in ways a paperclip could never hope to. We just don't expect a dog to behave like a human, we don't expect it to be as socially adept. So its social transgressions are not as serious to us. I can't help wondering if the Help Agent might have been less of a disaster had the dog been the default character rather than the paperclip.

The more interactive media are the more likely they are to evoke the social and as Clippy shows creating explicitly for the social is pretty difficult. Social groups have norms, that is there are rules of behavior. Some rules, like the ones Clippy was trying so desperately to observe even while failing miserably are widespread. Many though are specific to small groups and subcultures. I'll say more about that in a minute, Clippy's designers were well aware of the social norms they were dealing with. You can see the animations are attempts to use common human conventions to signal states like awareness and readiness while not being too intrusive.

If reactions to the Microsoft Help agent were purely individual preferences we'd expect to see a much wider range of responses, most being moderate. It is only when we consciously invoke a social perspective that we can see why and how it fails but also make sense of the near universal reaction. It also helps give insight to which creative implementations may be better in a given context and why. The lesson is that violating widely held social norms will lead to widespread disapproval. Has it had a lasting impact on the Brand? Perhaps, ask yourself which of Clippy's behaviors you also attribute to Microsoft.

## Identity and Brand

If we look at identity through the individual frame we see it as a property of a person or thing. As something that is intrinsic to the person. Even though people come to regard their identities as their own, people aren't born with identities. Identities are continually constructed and reconstructed socially.

What is misleading about looking at identity through an individual frame is that it implies a kind of control that just isn't real. As a person, my identity in society is not really entirely up to me. The way I dress, how I act, are all reflections of how I see myself and how I want others to see me, but at the end of the day other people decide what they think about me and they are often influenced by each other. So while it is unlikely that I will change my self perception much based on what someone says about me, you may change your opinion of me based on what someone you hold in regard says about me.

As long as communications were dominated by mass channels, the illusion of total control of brand identity seemed plausible. The audience was limited in their ability to communicate to each other and hence, gossip about your brand. But it was an artifact of imperfect communication not a social reality. In a mass media world viewed through the individual frame the communication looked like this.

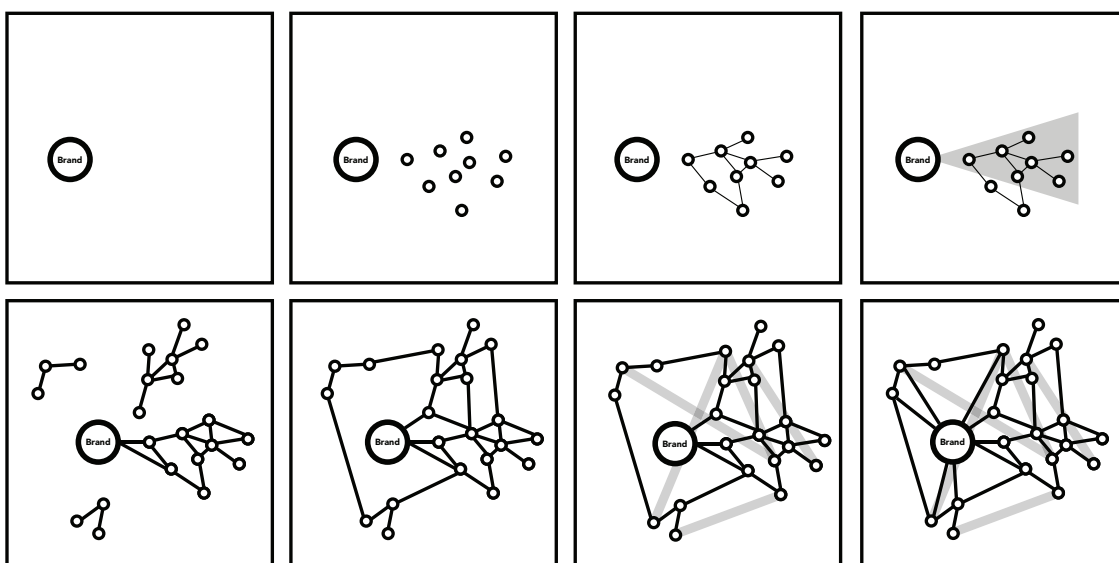
And nobody, neither brand owners nor their customers really paid much attention to the social connections. Network communications doesn't change the essence of socializing or being social. But it does shift the patterns of socialization. Simply put more people communicate more directly in more ways and more constantly than before. The density of our social world has increased as it has become globalized. The social inclusion of brands has become visible and people are starting to notice it and to act on it.

Brand identity is influenced not only by the image you wish to project through advertising and PR, but also, perhaps even more so, by your brand's social position within this networked space. Sure you can and do own the trademark, but what it represents is a negotiation of the various communities, that gather around and participate in its construction. To understand the negotiation requires understanding the various communities involved, including your own organizational culture. Increasing communications bring increasing scrutiny.

## Contexts of Participation

In July, Facebook started rolling out redesign. About 3 months ago Facebook ended the cross over period and forcibly switched the users who had not yet opted-in over to the new design. There has been an ensuing ruckus, not entirely unexpected as Facebook has been through this before. Notably when they introduced News Feeds in 2006.

As an experience designer myself I know just how difficult it is to do redesigns. There are occasions where more radical redesigns are the only feasible alternative, even if not ideal. Lots have been written and said about the Facebook redesign and I'm not going to weigh-in on it myself. But a clear pattern has emerged with Facebook – UI change, revolt, partial capitulation.



Like the example I gave earlier of Clippy, the question is: why such strong reactions? Honestly, I think it is a complex set of circumstances and no doubt the full answer is manifold, but I'd like to focus on one possibility. The volatility is part of the social context of facebook.

Some of you no doubt have already seen and perhaps read the report released last week by the Digital Youth Project. – Living and learning with new media. Unfortunately I've only had a chance to skim through the summary findings. It the culmination of three years ethnographic study involving some 15 researchers and hundreds of participants. I highly recommend it. In it the authors make a useful distinction that is worth exploring a little bit. They identify two broad contexts for participating in social activities through the internet. Friendship-driven and Interest-driven. As the names imply the motivations for participation are very different; each bringing its own set of social constellations.

Facebook is of course primarily friendship-driven. Teenagers in particular use it to hang-out. What is easy to miss about this context however is that hanging-out really means hanging-out with your friends, specifically away from Parents and Teachers, the authority figures that have so much power in kids lives. So although the wider public may view these spaces as inherently public by virtue of their being online the kids do not. The space belongs to them because it is the one place they control in a world where they often have little control over other spaces. As dana boyd points out, Imagine your reaction if your someone came to your house and rearranged your furniture, even if she had told you she was going to do it well in advance. This may seem a problem that is peculiar to teenagers, but I wonder. If cloud computing really does take off, won't we run into similar issues among adults too. Product cycles that throw surprises into my workday seem like they could be pretty annoying on the face of it.

It may also be that this confounding of public and private space helps explain why ad response rates are so low on social sites. Advertisers are butting into what is essentially a private party and gate crashing to do it. To succeed in this space advertisers need to be invited. To get invited they to be relevant to what is going on.

Call me cynical but in the same way I am skeptical that about agent based technologies, like Clippy, soon becoming sophisticated enough to be truly socially intelligent. I seriously doubt ad server algorithms will crack through the relevance barrier to become successful in friend-driven social contexts anytime soon. Undoubtedly, response rates will be improved, still the majority of messages will continue to be ignored. Here the only solution is to invest time and effort to understand the essential context of the interactive space you want to operate in.

Some observers seem convinced that Facebook is designing to an older crowd now. Perhaps so. Older groups aren't wrestling with the intense issues of adolescence and perhaps the ways they use Facebook are more amenable to advertising. But it isn't obvious that achieving relevance will be any more straight forward. It may be that Facebook is also trying to edge more into the interest-driven side of things where the social contexts can be a bit easier to identify and navigate.

As the label implies Interest-driven groups attract individuals who find their way to and coalesce around a particular topic or activity. Often the individuals involved don't know each other beforehand. Most people lurk or dabble others become more active and a few become regular participants and leaders. Frequently these groups form around products or media. I haven't done a survey here, but there seems to be a minimum level of creative execution or design value needed for these groups to grow and thrive. It is with these groups that the added value of creative and design components are easiest to distinguish because they are often the nucleus around which the groups form and directly fuel motivation.

Take World of Warcraft. It provides a place for people to gather and a story for them to share. Rich media experience are easily shared experiences. They are easily shared because very diverse individuals with little else in common have a rich set ideas and moments to draw on. They can collaborate or compete. Lead or follow. The story provides the spark which allows their own imaginations to flourish.

Good creative and concept design gives the seed that get people past the blank page, so to speak. In a new media context the trick is provide structure that is rich enough to attract and engage, while allowing room for others to extend and grow their ideas through involvement.

Or take a product like the iPhone, same thing really. The basic structure is the modernist elegance and the flexible sensors and displays. People can elaborate on it. At the moment Apps are all the rage. Often, fairly useless and things like drinking a beer. Apple has sparked participation by fueling people's imaginations, just like World of Warcraft does albeit in a different way. It worth noting that both of these have also created opportunities for commercial participation, although not always intentionally.

In experience design when we talk about people's motivations, among other things, we mention Status and Identity when we look at them through a social frame we see Recognition and Connection.

## Values and Business Models

I want to come back to a point that I touched on earlier briefly but that I think is under appreciated. For a brand to succeed in New Media there must be general alignment between the stakeholder values, a company's culture and it's identity. I'm not suggesting that you have to be soul mates with all your stakeholders, just that there is enough in common to make conflict resolution possible. There is no use building a brand identity around values that your business model can't support. I'll use the music industry as an example.

Overall music labels have had a pretty tough time adjusting to the arrival of new media. On the whole the industry has adopted a very conservative stance fighting change aggressively. This hasn't worked out so well for the labels as their cash cow, CD sales, continue to erode. Interestingly, if we look at various other measures, interest in music has never been higher. Various stake holders have responded differently. One, typified by Warner Music Group, has pushed 360 deals. A 360 deal is where an artist effectively cedes rights to all current and future revenue sources. So in addition to CD and MP3 sales, ticket sales and merchandising are also split with the label. Basically the label winds-up owning the Band's brand. Another response is the start-up Topspin. Topspin's offering is to essentially be a marketing toolkit that artists can use to promote themselves. Couple to a product offering that let's buyer find their price point, efficiently optimizing margins. To attract artists they give a much bigger slice of the pie to the artist. It is sort of the opposite of 360 in that the artist keeps full control of their brand.

The thing to notice is, that everyone is being forced to rework their business model. Even though it is much to early to tell which model will prevail, TopSpin's model starts off with much better stakeholder alignment. If they can execute, I bet they do pretty well.

People gather around common values and interests, organizations must share those values and interests and must communicate that consistently through both identity and behavior; remaining mindful of interactive contexts and sensitive to social norms. Communities also require diversity to thrive, organizations are part of that essential diversity.

There are many things that organizations do very well that networked publics appreciate and respond to. Compelling experiences incite social engagement. Use your design leadership and creative vision to spark people's imaginations.

Turn your Brand into a social Actor.