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Darwinism and the internet – it's about survival of the 'clickiest'

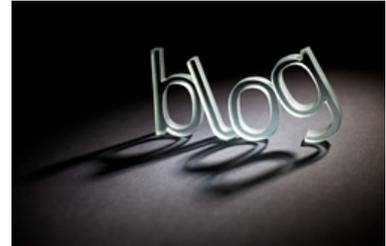
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Jeff Patmore, head of Strategic University Research at BT, explores the development of communication

When the human race invented written language and literacy, the communication of ideas across vast distances and through time became possible.

Initially only those with power and influence could create textual artefacts. Some such as philosophers and teachers did it themselves, others such as religious leaders and kings had others do it for them. But essentially a very small number of people were creators and a significantly larger number of people became consumers.

For a very long time this remained the status quo as creating new artefacts was expensive, time consuming and required considerable skill. However, once produced, the text containing the originator's thinking could last for many centuries and all those who had learned how to read it could read its copies in many countries. The creation of written the word also contributed to the development of 'viral communication' as people talked about what they had read to others.



Substantial shift

Over time, more people became creators of textual artefacts due to the invention of the printing press that enabled mass production of the printed word. This massive technological shift allowed almost anyone with an attractive and marketable idea to go to a publisher and launch their thoughts in the form of a textual artefact that would be then delivered into the hands of the masses.

Fast forward to today and the creation of the internet means that anyone can create text and media artefacts.

Today, if only one per cent of the people on our planet created a blog entry or a video on YouTube just once a year, their contributions would amount to at least 60 million new artefacts each year. In reality, the number of new artefacts added on the internet each year is much higher than this, even if we just count contributions that are regarded as useful or valuable by those consuming them.

Popular culture

With the enormous and growing repository of content on the internet, an almost 'Darwinian' effect takes place. Those items that become popular through vast numbers of 'hits' and viral communication survive, often becoming part of popular culture, and those items that do not come to the attention of the population, or have few 'hits', eventually vanish. We all contribute to this 'voting mechanism' every time we access content and click on a hyperlink.

We are facing a change in the evolution of human communication that is perhaps not as big as the invention of the written word and literacy, but nonetheless a significant one. New digital devices and fast internet access are certainly transforming how we do things and how we think about our world, and the vision of 'anywhere anytime access' is definitely approaching rapidly.

Speed and access

Faster and ubiquitous access means that our 'clicks' happen even faster and our feedback to creators of content is now in real time. It is amazing to see how quickly we can see comments about our newly uploaded content often from people whom we have never met and living elsewhere on our planet.

Now any individual with an internet connection and an enabled digital device has access to a repository of information far larger than has ever been available to any human being before and what is amazing is that we have adapted to this new paradigm in just a few years. How this evolution continues will be interesting to observe.

Our thanks to Graham M Jones, a linguistic anthropologist at MIT who inspired this article.

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