

## What's Wrong with the Internet? A Manifesto.

By Jon Gingerich

People say a lot of dumb things. This has always been an unfortunate feature of ours, but it's especially apparent given the volumes we're now able to transmit and receive. The Internet's biggest achievement seems to have been its ability to give a soapbox to those who least need it. For users seeking access to legitimate, unbiased information, the advent of our infinite library comes as somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory.

Take a common brand of banal boilerplate like "print is dead." Suppositions such as these reveal a misunderstanding of what the printed word does, and reiterate an unfortunate shortsightedness regarding the technology that has supposedly been sent to kill it. Technologies remedy unfulfilled conditions. They assimilate old-world content in the form of new transmissions. It would be a mistake, as is often the case, to assume new technologies are designed to replace progenitors of automation before them. Though new technologies assimilate content often used by a prior technology, it's an unintended consequence. New technologies live on top of old ones. The advent of one is not designed to subsume the other.

The automobile didn't replace the locomotive; one offers greater range of mobility and personalized travel while the other, now greatly limited in use and popularity, performs freight tasks the former cannot. The printing press amplified a diverse spread of preexisting ideas; it advanced the oral tradition but never replaced speech; it offered a permanent record for the speaker and furthered the spread of the original article, resulting in every philosophical breakthrough from the Reformation to the Enlightenment. The radio and the telephone furthered the tentacles of the industrial age. Television was theatre of mass production. Neither replaced the telegraph or the stage — the limits of their expressions guaranteed an inevitable attrition.

The Internet, by comparison, won't replace newspapers or magazines, because the means by which the two express content are entirely different. The Internet's first order of business has been to assimilate the preexisting syntax. Future permissions granted by new technologies will shape the way we view communications henceforth. Print continues to express content in ways the Internet cannot; it remains "alive" as long as those expressions continue. It resumes its previous role, albeit in limited capacity, a fate that will someday be shared by the personal computer.

Our communications are intrinsically linked to the casual features of each delivery medium. To those raised in the later half of the 20th century, our memories come with unmistakable adjunct attachments: the granule-dotted Polaroid, the magenta-soaked Super8 film, the rewinding whirl of the videocassette. Media changes not only how we interact with each other, it influences the ways in which we behave, it alters our worldview. Over time, technologies birth corresponding social behaviors.

While it's far too early to enumerate all the psychic features our new digital landscape will bring, what is certain is that, like all forms of media before it, the Internet is terraforming a new tribalism onto the collective conscience of its subjects, melding a new community with a new set of rules, uprooting our very social order and deposing our elders of media with it. As a matter of course for all nascent technologies, we currently find ourselves in a transitional phase, awestruck at the amount of content at our disposal and the possibilities they may bring, yet grasping for some vestige of socially malleability, let alone a way to profit from it.

The problem is that recently, the latter has come at a great cost to the former. The modern Web is driven too much by profit and not enough by information: a lot of data is being managed by all the wrong people for all the wrong reasons. The result is a confused ontology, one that survives by loading brand messages in the guise of content onto the backs of its users, at the expense of our privacy and every principle upon which the Web was founded. The Internet has been taken hostage by content providers, PR firms, ad agencies and marketing companies that have exploited anonymity to divert our search for quality content, co-opted the egalitarian ethos of the Web for the sake of compromising of our privacy, and assumed authenticity so as to replace culture with watered down, low quality, centralized content, a move that attempts to quantum leap consumer culture into the digital age. In the end, it makes for a pretty crummy Internet experience. Taken to its furthest extreme, the result is nothing short of a digital colonialism, one that reduces people to metrics and reinforces further social behaviors that will inexorably diminish the quality of content for future generations.

#### **Technologies and Corresponding Social Disorder**

Regardless of all the generated content, new applications, exponentially increasing user activity and marketing hoopla surrounding the Internet, right now the negatives far outweigh the good. It hasn't always been this way, and by conservative estimates I'd say social media is to blame for about 90 percent of its degeneration.

Studies show that while the Internet is growing each minute, its users are becoming increasingly stationary. Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia aren't the only Websites out there, but each year they're becoming the only sites users visit. Web 2.0's cross pollination of content, its ability to meld media platforms, has enabled social networks to limit users' range of motion, thus serving as a sort of one-stop-shop for content. These social habits run contrary to the core principles espoused during the Web's incipience, which was hailed as a wild west of anything-goes content. Users with no coding experience (and less design savvy) built personalized Web pages catered to any range of topics, igniting the public on a never ending URL quest for the newest thing. It was an experience that bordered on overwhelming and certainly introduced us to some bad content, but nonetheless offered for the first time a wealth of new information at our fingertips.

In sociological terms, this is known as the "The Strength of Weak Ties," or the idea that information we receive on the periphery of our social contacts is more likely to be novel or informative than information we receive from our closest peers. The more immobile users stay on the Web, the less likely they are to be introduced to new content.

Closed, centralized systems like Facebook reinforce a strong confirmation bias: we begin viewing the same news sources, recycling the same anecdotes, connecting with the same people. Even when offered an endless sea of information, we eventually find and fill niches, increasingly defaulting on content that reiterates our preconceived perceptions.

Then there's the lack of privacy. There's something about being behind a computer screen, away from our peers' immediate field of vision, that gives many users an instant proclivity to drop all filters about what private details they'll reveal about themselves and worse, grants a tacit approval for others to snoop into our private business.

We are unwittingly searched against. Employers routinely comb cyberspace looking for incriminating evidence. Drop a regrettable phrase on a message board, make

a drunken error in the presence of a digital camera or, God forbid, make the wrong enemy, and expect it to be inscribed on your permanent record, scorned in the court of public opinion for all to see.

There's a funny effect this has had on our immediate social behaviors. When given access to anonymity and an audience, the Internet has caused seemingly 'normal' users to metamorphose into indignant, trolling bullies. Acts of drive-by hostility and childish name-calling are so common an entirely new social order has evolved on the Internet that barely passes teething stage in the analogue world. A quick visit to YouTube aptly displays the solipsistic narcissism that characterizes today's peephole culture, where the works of world-renowned artists and thinkers are routinely upbraided by an army of semi-literate obstructionists and their barrage of misspelled expletives.

Hypocritically enough, the more transparent one's profile is, the lower the shroud of anonymity, the higher the chances these e-warriors will recoil into abject conformists who readily parrot the approved opinion of the crowd for fear they'll become the next victims of a message board pig-pile.

There is another irony in all this: the more digital we become, the more we collectively thirst for the analogue authenticity we have willingly replaced. In the same way that the early printing press usurped the content of the oral tradition, history seemed to stop in its tracks the second digital culture came along to analyze it to death.

Many of the most popular Websites out there, when not regurgitating *ad infinitum* a montage of home video bloopers and stupid pranks, seem largely devoted to unearthing pop culture trivia from decades past and adding a twee, hipster spin. The result is a bridge troll's amateur hour that relies on facile irony, close enough to the artifact to posture yet removed enough to allow smug winks at those who "get" the troves they've successfully mined, an anthropology that persistently hungers for content but never offers anything new.

I don't need to illustrate how easy this is: take a former pillar of pop culture (Burt Reynolds), juxtapose him/her with an incongruous and ubiquitous other (kittens) and you have an instant blog hit. The further we move into Web 2.0 culture, the more homogenized our collective content seems to become. Social networks are, for the most part, a Sargasso of mindless patter in the form of ego-messaging status updates and insignificant observations. Web 2.0 is like watching a movie for the first time with the director's commentary on. It reinforces the idea that culture died with the dawn of social media and all that survives are millions of armchair nerds left to infinitely analyze the pieces.

All this has made an indelible impact on the economy and entertainment industries that exist in the offline world. We love the arts just as much as before (and we all think we're artists, don't we?), but we haven't exactly made it easy for new artists to make a living. On the contrary, we have the gall to expect our favorite artists to give us their works for free. Any opposition to this skewed economic model is assailed by the technocracy; expect to weather a storm of tedious inanity from bloggers who, quick to deride the death of print journalism, survive by circulating news stories already broken by print sources like the *New York Times*.

Oddly enough, we still don't know how to make money from the Internet. Until very recently, any monetary success made on the Web was barely above anecdotal. Even the biggest sites in the world (like Amazon) have only recently begun to turn a profit, and

they have yet to recompense for all their years in the red. Some publishers (the *Wall Street Journal*, *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times*, and U.K.'s the *Times*) have now resorted to erecting pay walls, and even Web 2.0 powerhouses like Hulu have considered charging subscription fees for access to certain content. These companies understand that such drastic restructuring runs the risk of losing viewers, but they're forced to entertain these measures because they know advertising alone can't conceivably buttress the burden of their operations, at least not at present.

Facebook, like Google, is finally beginning to show it can make money. These are good signs, but it could be argued that the only reason they make a profit is because they deal in large numbers. There isn't a scaled-down model to show how an online strategy that works for Walmart could work for a Main Street pharmacy.

Web 2.0's financial shortcomings bring me to my final point, yet also return us to an issue previously discussed: privacy. Amazon and eBay track and store users' browsing habits. Facebook, which initially touted itself as a safer, private alternative to competing social networking sites, has since pulled a blatant bait-and-switch, increasingly softening the terms of its privacy practices so it can monetize the growing database of information it stores on its users.

Facebook turns its users into outright brand ambassadors, allowing site advertisers to poach personal conversations, contacts, employment history, preferences and identity so they can later be targeted for marketing messages. The site has also made numerous undisclosed attempts to share users' personal information with third parties, either by surreptitiously adding browser habits to user profiles without their knowledge (which resulted in class action lawsuits) or even by leasing personal information abroad when users visit third-party partner sites, as it did with its Instant Personalization program.

In a PR salve that came in the form of a May *Washington Post* op-ed, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg promised the company would make it easier for users to opt out of having their information given to third parties. He didn't say Facebook would stop giving out user information if we didn't tell them not to, and the company's practices have continued more or less as usual.

Google isn't far behind. This year the company debuted its Google Buzz application, a social media tool that allows users to integrate third party network updates into the company's Gmail service. As a user default, Buzz presumptuously populates profiles with fellow Gmail contacts whom users connect with frequently. The mobile version of this program even defaults to reveal users' physical location.

Interestingly enough, it's Google's oldest networking tools that take cyber intrusion to the ultimate level. Google installs cookies recording what pages you visit, and logs every search you've ever made into a massive database, along with your IP address and the date/time of your search. Google's Gmail service even mines the contents of users' personal emails so they can later be pitched corresponding ad copy.

It amazes me that this practice is knowingly permitted by users. It's as if we allow content providers the right to snoop into our private business simply because we're getting something free, or if we just surrender our privacy altogether because a pornographic transparency is *de rigueur* in the Internet age, as if a new technology somehow permits a separation between what's on our hard drives and what's in our bedroom closets. It doesn't.

Imagine this scenario: your telephone company has offered to cut a portion of your monthly bill on the condition that they implement a computer program that scans your personal calls. Soon after having a conversation with a friend, a telemarketer calls your home with offers for products they think you'd be interested in. Regardless of the savings, if this were to happen there's little doubt you'd cancel this service or find another phone provider outright.

What makes the Web so different? As we discussed earlier, new technologies birth new social behaviors. However, it's we (humans, citizens, Internet users) who form these habitats, not corporations seeking to monetize germinal landscapes. The Internet is where the glut of our future conversations will take place. Continuing to allow intrusive practices reinforces a culture of corporate ethnocentricity; it sends the message that we don't care about our privacy, that new technologies are an excuse to rewrite existing social permissions, that we'll allow being taken advantage of in return for a free service. Contrary to recent admonitions that claim otherwise, nothing is "free" on the Internet. As we will see, we've simply been getting what we've paid for.

### **The New Slavery**

It's no wonder our forays into Web 2.0 have been wrought with such heartache, given its future was peppered with freshman idealist catchphrases such as "information wants to be free." Information doesn't "want" anything. We do. Information has a value determined by its relative quality and scarcity. We don't pay for much of our online content because, like air, it doesn't usually come with a price tag. We are motivated by unmet needs. Hence, scarce content that has value to users is worth a monetary sum when balanced by the appropriate scales of supply and demand.

When the lords of Web 2.0 mull over their envisioned egalitarian utopia, they pontificate on a world in which all information is available at the same frequency. What they don't realize is that good information on the Internet is becoming increasingly harder to find because, by design, it's growing scarcer in relation to the bad information that surrounds it.

This is occurring for a number of reasons. First, data is dumb. It's designed to aggregate for an end other than its own; it can't comprehend its own importance or lack thereof. It's for this very reason the sum library of our total information is becoming laughably uneven. Walmart constantly feeds a database of about 2.5 petabytes of data, nearly 170 times the size of all the books in our Library of Congress. By contrast, the entire record of some thinkers in Ancient Greece who were fundamental in shaping modern democracy is limited to only a few paragraphs. Regardless of its immense size, the Internet paints an inaccurate history of the world we built. By design it's capricious, giving preference to ephemeral, fly-by-night content that's popular for a brief period of time versus what has lasted the test of time, or what can benefit a few users versus what's important to the rest of us.

You don't need to be a mathematician to understand the simple logic that if most online content is bad, and if more content is added to the pile each day, then an increasing ratio of bad content is quickly outnumbering the good on the Internet.

Second, the Internet rewards lowest-common-denominator information because the Internet is designed to favor what's most popular as opposed to what's best. A search in Google will yield results that are the most clicked, not the best researched, not the most informed nor the ones that are even correct. Google's structural naiveté offers a paradox central to understanding the Internet's single biggest flaw, as it highlights the predicate

kink upon which many of the problems listed herein originate: computers don't understand intrinsically human concepts like value, trust or quality.

This translational error, the natural result of an algorithm's inability to understand human variables, is the reason why the Internet will always take the advice of mobs before experts. What's worse, it leaves the door open for predatory controls, for information created to steer users away from good, unbiased content in favor of something preferential or monetized.

This brings me to my last point: bad content makes money. Companies profit from Google's skewed algorithms by engaging in Search Engine Optimization services, which essentially involves rigging a Website's content to be crawled by search engines, thus bubbling to the top of query results. Like Google, the captains of our PR, ad and marketing industries aren't interested in quality content — they're motivated by money. The content that appears at the top of a search result is not only often uninformed, it's potentially rigged for the purpose of generating clicks. In other words, the Web has been restructured not only to reward bad content, but to reward bad content that can churn a profit.

This system also rewards anyone who agrees to play by its rules. Google's AdSense program pays third-party site owners on a per-click basis to host Google ads germane to that page's content. A cottage industry has sprung up around this concept, with site owners churning out endless streams of bunk content enticing users to follow the informational carrot to a pit of AdSense clicks. Companies like eHow and Suite101 pay writers to pump out quick, uninformed "how-to" articles on thousands of popular search topics. For Internet users seeking genuine information, these sites are little more than noise: the actual content contains little or no use value, and is typically penned by inexperienced writers, with the text purposefully manipulated to achieve maximum SEO. They exist not as sources of real information but as pied pipers leading users to ads masquerading as content.

Of course, if you use Google to answer your "how to" queries, you'll find that accompanying your results are ads churned out by the company's AdWords program, an advertising vehicle where sponsored, semi-corresponding links appear next to user query results. When appearing in concert with SEO-rigged content, a Google search result is little more than ads running beside ads.

Regardless of what you may have heard, Google doesn't specialize in the business of search. Google's armory of products (search, email, its Chrome browser and the popular YouTube video flagship) are merely vehicles that drive users to ad clicks. Google's range of products, coupled with the fact that they're giving them away for free, entice users to adopt the company as a sort of chauffeur for the duration of their Internet stroll. In exchange, users receive their information on an endless highway of brand messages.

Companies like Suite101 and eHow publish content that is more likely to be the focus of popular Google searches. So, topics deemed the most popular require the most bad content to be written about them. Internet users are thus becoming statistically more likely to stumble across advertisement camouflaged as content. This is perhaps the most damning prospect of all: the most popular content on the Internet is quickly becoming the least trustworthy.

If there's one form of content in the online world that's doing well — the only one, in fact — it's advertising. Though an otherwise economically dismal year for practically every industry in the country, U.S. Internet advertising revenues (including search, video and display) totaled nearly \$23 billion in 2009, according to an annual report by IAB. These figures include a record 4.3 trillion display ads, and a three percent increase in Internet search ads from 2008, according to ComScore. Online ad sales were also up for all the major social media sites, totaling about \$1.2 billion in 2009, an increase of nearly four percent from the previous year. MySpace still leads this field with an estimated \$490 million in advertising, and Facebook comes in at a close second, with \$435 million. Total social media advertising figures are expected to grow by seven percent in 2010.

As a point of reference, it should be mentioned that during the same time period, print media lost nearly 30 percent of its total advertising revenues and broadcast TV lost nearly 13 percent. As a result of this, nearly a third of the newsroom staff that existed in 2001 has since been wiped out. U.S. newspapers lost about 6,000 journalists in the last year alone, according to recent statistics by Pew. A study by Oxbridge Communications shows that nearly 430 U.S. magazines closed shop in 2009 and U.S. weekday newspaper circulation fell nine percent between just March and October of last year. Pew further projects that the U.S. newspaper industry only has about \$4 billion in editorial capacity left.

Contrast this to the current ad rosters on big Internet search sites, which made \$10.7 billion in 2009 and now comprise the bulk of all Internet ad revenues (about 47 percent). Studies by Efficient Frontier predict ad spending on big search sites will increase between 15 and 20 percent this year, with Google leading the trend while Yahoo maintains its lion's share in display ads. According to recent estimates by Barclay's Capital, Google's total display ads sales could account for about \$1 billion of the company's revenues in 2010, an increase of more than 40 percent from the previous year.

Regardless of this impressive growth, and even though the Internet now makes up about 20 percent of U.S. consumers' total media consumption, it should be mentioned that only about 12 percent of total ad dollars in the U.S are spent online, and major U.S. brands still spend less than 10 percent of their marketing budget on online campaigns. Corporations are notoriously slow for catching up with the times. As our captains of industry recover from recession, as their marketing agencies of record convince them to continue their digital migration, and as ad metrics reveal an increased value in online placement, you can expect online advertising to begin carrying the torch for all future advertising revenues.

In return, you can also expect the number of online ads to skyrocket, you can expect marketers to aggregate more content of your personal lives for the purpose of delivering higher-precision targeting, and you can expect ad practices on search and social sites to become increasingly manipulative and predatory. Regardless of everything that has been mentioned, we ain't seen nothing yet.

### **Reclaiming Media**

Advertising is a conversation on public life. By design, it seeks to form a relationship that is increasingly intrusive: its objective is to diminish the divide that exists between personal and private space. With the advent of increasingly interactive media, advertising has evolved from a moderately passive medium to one that can only be

characterized as implacably voracious. The Web's ability to blur the lines of commercial and content, advertising and editorial, turns users into unwitting carriers of a brand virus.

It would be one thing if online advertising retained the roles of its print and broadcast cousins, if ads could simply be hosted on Websites as they often are, existing on one side of the membrane that divides the monetary from the meaningful. But this is quickly growing out of fashion. It's increasingly difficult to differentiate the content that benefits site owners from the content that benefits users. In this environment, advertising obfuscates our access to information. Users are no longer central to the Internet experience, and an inherent conflict of interest grows between the gatekeepers of content and those who search for it. The extreme outcome of this is a wasteland of misinformation, where practically all content within reach is advertorial, where researched, unbiased and valuable information is scarce under poor supply conditions to the point that its availability resumes what it was in the pre-online world.

In a way, this entire mess is our fault. Advertising's evolution into a predatory species was no doubt aided by our collective abandonment of a sustainability model where the ebbs and tides of supply and demand supported previous transmissions. We've created a model that practically begs advertisers to cover the surmounting costs of content, and in the process we've given them carte blanche to compromise its scope, bias and quality. Few of us foresaw that advertising could ever become so antagonistic, so combative against the senses, and fewer still could have guessed an industry would arise for the purpose of clogging up the ether with bad data, but we should have known by now that when someone else foots the bill, the resulting product is always preferential to their bottom line.

The good news is that much of the current model of online advertising is quickly on its way to extinction. The most ineffective forms of Internet advertising are still the ones driving revenues. For the most part, each of these employ notably primitive techniques to rally an entirely new community, and none have caught up with behavioral realities. Millions of impressions do not result in millions of clicks, and millions of clicks do not result in millions of sales, or even hundreds of sales. The current average click rate on banner ads — the Internet's clumsiest form of advertisement — is about two percent. The average click-through rate for a Google AdWords ad is also about two percent. Either way, it's not much of a return on investment. According to a recent study by Pew, 79 percent of consumers reported they've never clicked on an online ad. Sales have been so disproportionately poor to impressions that one has to wonder if advertisers simply fool themselves into believing the old cost-per-mile model still applies, that at least they're "getting their name out there," as if a banner ad is a billboard on a well-traveled highway. It isn't.

Of course, every PR firm, ad agency and marketing company in the world wants to pretend they're on the cutting edge of social media, and no one wants to believe our emperors of propaganda aren't wearing any clothes. However, the mathematics behind ad targeting reveal a double-edged sword: as metrics improve (and they do each year), advertisers will be shocked to discover that sales resulting from a campaign are celestially disproportionate to the numbers of views, clicks, or passersby who never registered with the brand's message or even noticed the ad to begin with. Marketers love to show how improved targeting can get the right message to the right audience, but with

more precise tools available to clients they'll find themselves under increasing pressure to put their money where their mouths are.

So, how will future content be paid for? The other good news is that not all forms of Internet advertising are bad. There are several vehicles growing in the online world that offer noticeably non-intrusive alternatives to click-through and pay-per-click mediums. One of these is online video advertising, which continues to rake in a growing portion of Internet ad revenues. While video accounted for only about three percent of total Internet ad revenues during the first half of 2009 — or about \$480 million — this totals a growth of nearly 38 percent from the same time the year before.

Video is nimble. It's a familiar format for advertisers currently airing commercials on broadcast TV, and as such, is a springboard for clients who find they can cross platforms without forming new brand strategies. It can also be imbedded just about anywhere. Moreover, as the Web becomes increasingly video-centric, as the gap continues to narrow between the Web and its broadcast counterparts, video accommodates and compliments tomorrow's media landscape. Best of all, by design video's content remains stationary. It can't sabotage a user's Internet search and disguise itself as anything other than it is.

If the Internet is going to make money in the future, we (citizens, consumers, Internet users) need to regain our place in the Internet experience. Computers, like books, radios and televisions, don't understand causality. Computers can be fed millions of if-x-then-y scenarios, but they don't understand context, they can't comprehend the subtleties of language or the nuances of human behavior. They don't know what's good and what isn't.

The business and economic structures that surrounded the print, TV and film industries and the extremely high internal costs their medium outputs incurred were a natural vetting process that performed a great deal of quality control on behalf of the information disseminated. That many historic mistakes were made along the way in each industry is not a point of discussion here. The bottom line is that the egalitarian beauty of the medium shouldn't mean we let the ship steer itself.

The Internet needs us to direct the information it amasses. Anything less amounts to server rooms spinning empty data. The only way for this to happen is if Internet users regain centrality, if we remain in control of data, and if we begin to heavily monitor the content we put into the informational compost.

We need tools to mine the good information from the bad.

We need a system that rewards content that is beneficial to us, and one that influences better online social behaviors.

We need an economic model that is both profitable and draws a line in the sand between advertisement and content.

These are tall orders, but there are several steps we can take if we want to begin fixing it.

**1. Remove yourself from social media sites like Facebook.** Social media is conversation driven: it takes advantage of the dialogue you'd be having even if Facebook didn't exist. Instead, join online communities that are more content driven; participate in online behaviors that don't limit your range of movement. Start a blog or participate in a news group. If you have a hobby or fancy yourself an expert on a particular subject, create and dedicate a Website that gives users an alternative to Wikipedia.

As a Facebook user, you are not their customer: you are their subject. As such, you'll always be a target for their real customers' brand messages, and it will always serve both parties' interests to know more about you. Facebook shouldn't be a middleman between you and your friends, especially since those relationships probably existed long before Facebook came to be.

**2. Stop using Google.** The more Google applications you use, the more ads they will sell, the more ads you will be pitched, and the more both parties will know about you. Use an email service that doesn't employ bots to scan the contents of your messages, and use search engines that don't compromise your personal information or turn your queries into an advertising bomb raid. Plenty of search engines currently do this (several others don't even record your IP address). There's no reason why Google should be the only shop in town. Go find them, preferably not with Goggle.

**3. Start paying for the things you enjoy.** We cast a collective vote several years ago when we decided we no longer wanted to pay for online content, we painted ourselves into a corner when we christened the digital age with reclamations such as "information wants to be free." The onus is on the user to make the Internet a better place.

Purchase MP3s from artists you enjoy, either directly or from online music vendors. If you read articles behind a pay wall, stop sneaking through backdoors and pay for it. Do you really want bedroom bloggers to replace our fourth estate? Donate to start-ups. Support non-intrusive forms of advertising that pay for the content you enjoy. The sooner we stop listening to hipster armchair musings regarding quixotic data hereafters that, coincidentally, offer no economic support plan, the quicker we'll ensure our access to a content unencumbered by the advertising machine that has poisoned the well of information for the past decade.

**4. Limit the content you post on message boards.** It's beyond me why YouTube thinks allowing leagues of racist comments on its site somehow improves its services or otherwise carries the populist torch of the Internet. Similarly, I have a hard time understanding why anyone in 2010 believes posting comments on a message board contributes to a meaningful conversation, when most likely you're just stoking the tempers of mobs.

If you manage a message board, impose stricter guidelines and higher profile transparency so trolls can't hide behind a shroud of anonymity. Remove content that is used to defame, malign or otherwise detract from the conversation, and petition every message board you visit to begin doing the same.

**5. Demand transparency from content providers, and work together to create a Web that does what all new media should: set a stage to compliment and advance the human conversation.** If the Web is going to work for people, it should be restructured to bend to intrinsically human variables like quality, value, context and most importantly, trust.

Create search systems where quality content appears at the top of query results instead of what's popular or what's rigged to appear there. How do we do this? For one, we need to teach computers to properly mine and sort quality content from non. Information is created around behaviors, not demographics. Demographics are the flavors of crowds. Behaviors are reactions to information within the constraints of an environment. If we have the ability to create facial recognition software, we can similarly

devise means to recognize human behavior online, its characteristics and how it appears in relation to hotspots of information. An Internet that better understands online human behavior — one that recognizes context and sentiment by analyzing and determining the causal relationships statements have with each other — would tell us who is likely to say what and where, and it would tell us where proper content should go. In the end, it would tell us what information is the most important to our needs, and it would guide us to create better future media.

Cultures do not truly come into their own until they stop transcribing past histories and begin assimilating content with the fruits of their own labor. So far we're not there yet. These are the first steps we can take to ensure the possibility that the Web could someday give us what we truly need: a body of content sorted on a hierarchy of quality that fits the contextual contours of its users' needs, one that accurately mirrors our diverse range of attitudes and beliefs but one that continues to build upon the library of human knowledge.