

The internet as a shared work desk

Two international online projects with NID-students in spring 2005

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1. Abstract

The world of the internet is changing its face. We have been getting used to drawing out every kind of desired information from the comprehensive, omnipresent world wide web. Now, the internet is transforming itself from mainly an information supplier into a space that allows elaborate communication and interaction. The dream of the early internet pioneers was to build a democratic medium, where everyone could participate, not only as consumers, but as producers of knowledge, art and culture too - this dream seems to become more and more true recently.

Thanks to so called "social applications" it becomes easy to share, publish, communicate and interact on a virtually world wide platform. Moreover, the collaborative development of projects have become feasible online, allowing separated parties to gather and work, as if sitting together in the same room, at the same desk.

With two projects, in spring 2005, students from Nagoka Institute of Design could experience the newest developments with online communication and learn how to use those for their own tasks. In both projects the counterpart was abroad, thousands of kilometers away and in a different culture: in Central Europe. The participants had to rely exclusively upon internet tools for all their collaborations.

This article mainly presents the two projects, their contents and the participants' experiences. I will embed it with a short description of how and why the internet is transforming into a collaborative medium, a fact which will effect our whole society in many ways.

keywords

international exchange
internet communication
participatory network
social applications
Ning, wiki, Wikipedia

1. 概要

インターネットの顔が変わりつつあります。既に我々は包括的かつ普遍的なワールドワイドウェブで欲しい情報を得ることに慣れたでしょう。しかし最近、インターネットは単なる情報の提供者という役割から先進コミュニケーションや練り上げたインタラクティブな空間へ着々と変化しています。インターネットの創始期、開発者達は、全てのユーザーが受信者としてのみではなく、誰でも自由に表現することのできる民主的メディアの発足を夢見ました。その夢はついに実現に近づいています。

ネット上の世界においていわゆる「ソーシャルアプリケーション」を使用することで全てのユーザーは自分のカルチャーや知識やアートを提供できるようになります。その上、同じ部屋に机を並べ一緒に集まるようにインターネット上でのプロジェクトの共同開発が現実的になりました。

2005年の春、長岡造形大学の学生は二つのプロジェクトで最新のインターネットコミュニケーションテクノロジーを経験し、実際に作業で利用しました。二つのプロジェクトは共に相手が海外の人達でした、何千キロも離れた違う文化持っている中央ヨーロッパ。全てのコラボレーションの手段はインターネットのツールのみでした。

この文書ではその二つのプロジェクトの内容を、上で述べた共同作業ができるインターネットの変化についての話題も織り交ぜて紹介します。そして、その変化はこれからの社会に様々な強い影響を及ぼすと信じています。

キーワード

国際交流
インターネットコミュニケーション
参加型ネットワーク
「ソーシャルアプリケーションズ」
ニング、ウィキ、ウィキペディア

2. Internet as a collaborative medium for communication

"We are only at the beginning of the biggest and most comprehensive cultural change, which ever happened on this planet" writes Erik Moeller in his book "Die heimliche Medienrevolution" [link.001] in regards to the recent transformation of the internet. In this chapter I will try to show the kinds of inventions Moeller's prediction is based on, and which aspects give notice of the media revolution, he is writing about.

When I am writing about the *internet* in the following, I am referring to the most popular and widely spread online service: the World Wide Web, abbreviated WWW, as it was invented by Tim Berners-Lee in 1990. The main accomplishment of his research is the HTML programming language with its hypertext structure and the introduction of a 'browser' which displays formerly coded content in a window [fig.001]. Especially the browser-supported design for viewing content was a crucial condition for the internet to become the mass phenomenon as we know it today. At the beginning of this century the always-on, broadband access became the standard connection to the internet and together with the improvements of server technology the ubiquitous web was not to stop anymore. For some years now the implementation of user-friendly software is adding to its popularity, enabling a majority of the web users to communicate, publish and share online.

Publishing, of course, was possible right from the beginning for a wide public. However, the technical and programming requirements proved to be too complicated, and so it has remained a domain of web-design specialists.

But not any longer: on many websites a new software category is emerging: "social applications". The expression has been coined by Marc Andreessen during the presentation of Ning at the beginning of October 2005. Andreessen is co-founder and original programmer of Netscape, the first mass-produced browser, which heralded the internet age in the early nineties. Ning, his new plaything these days, provides application modules on which anybody can create web sites that focus on and serve a particular community.

Ning actually combines two big concepts, which has been crucial for the shift of the internet from an information medium toward a more participative one: the open source policy and peer-to-peer communities.

First, like the main principles of the open source initiative, Ning allows everyone to reuse, copy or alter existing software in order to develop a different version of a given application. A user can build on the predecessor's achievements, free of charge, but under the condition, that the new code can be reused again by other programmers. But Ning takes it a step further: in keeping the "entry level" as low as possible, people without programming knowledge - means the rest of us - are able to create their own versions by simply cloning and customizing an already existing application. This may well be the incentive for a heavy push of new tool developments; tools, the world couldn't think of until now.

[link.001]

<http://medienrevolution.dpunkt.de>

Die heimliche Medienrevolution
Wie Weblogs, Wikis und freie Software die
Welt verändern
Heise, Hannover 2005



[fig.001]

A screenshot of one of the first web browsers, as developed by Tim Berners-Lee at Cern, a research laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland. Berners-Lee originally called his invention "WorldWideWeb". Later it became the "World Wide Web" as we know it today.

Ning

"Ning is a free online service (or, as we like to call it, a Playground) for building and using social applications. Social apps are web applications that enable anyone to match, transact, and communicate with other people" ([link.002] <http://www.ning.com>)

open source

The open source movement promotes the philosophy that everybody should have access to the source code of software, thus enabling a collaborative production with the concurrent use of different agendas and approaches in software design.

Second, the value of these social softwares is based on the accumulated knowledge and the activity of a particular community, a peer group. It assumes that the gathered information of such a collective is as adequate and as useful than that produced in traditional ways. In the case of "news" we can denote it as "citizen journalism" in contrast to mainstream or traditional journalism. Mainly weblogs show an increased impact on mass media, challenging it with new forms of information gathering and distribution.

I don't believe that media, as it existed before the internet, will be replaced to a large part by those endeavours. There is value in both forms. Therefore it will rather lead to a shift in market shares and the newer forms will *complement* their more traditional counterparts. But, one thing is for sure: the emergence of social software and its communication tools gives the whole media-system a new twist.

Many fine examples are already here on the internet to support this assumption. The above mentioned private weblogs can shed light in darker corners of world history, which are not or only insufficiently covered by mainstream journalism [link.004].

What has started as internet radio with niche program making and highly specialised target groups has advanced to new possibilities in the form of the podcast technology [link.005].

Web forums, especially when connected to online articles, broaden a thema by allowing different view points and immediate commenting on a given thema. For example the online magazine "Telepolis" has extended discussions by its readers on every one of its articles [link.006]. The world's largest web forum with an average of 2 million articles every day (as of January, 2006 [link.007]) is here in Japan: 2channel. A significant percentage of Japan's younger population discusses ideas, states opinions or seeks information on this internet platform [link.008].

Professional picture data bases are challenged by private photo albums, which offer a sheer endless amount of pictures. The secret for handling the huge database is a *tagging system* with keywords. This makes searching easy and successful [link.009].

Social guides and social shopping applications help to decide on everyday tasks like finding the right restaurant, suitable entertainment or consumer goods.

Other sites allow users to post their list of website bookmarks, thus enabling people with similar interests to connect and mutually share their bookmark collections [link.010]. The same approach, but in terms of scientific publications, can be observed on pages like CiteULike [link.011].

Many more variations of social software could be listed (friendship networks, online games, auction platforms ...) and with concepts like Ning their numbers are likely to increase in the near future. But there are successful and extremely useful applications, which have already been put into action for nearly a decade: "wikis". A wiki makes it possible to collectively write documents; means, anyone can edit, change or even delete wiki pages easily inside one's own browser window. The edits can be made in real-time, and appear almost instantaneously online. Wikis are programmed in their own open source code.

Weblog / Blogosphere

Weblog, or shortly blog, is an online journal, normally run by individuals which are updating it regularly, mostly on a daily basis. The term blogosphere refers to the virtual space, where weblogs are created, published and discussed.

[link.003]

<http://www.blogger.com>

[link.004]

<http://www.technorati.com>

[link.005]

<http://www.castwiki.com>

Telepolis

Telepolis is a German internet magazine with daily updated articles. They deal with media, internet-related topics and general politics, science, culture and society.

[link.006]

<http://www.heise.de/tp>

[link.007]

<http://stats.2ch.net/suzume.cgi?yes>

[link.008]

<http://2ch.net>

[link.009]

<http://www.flickr.com>

[link.010]

<http://del.icio.us>

[link.011]

<http://www.citeulike.org>

Examples include Wiktionary, Wikinews, Communitywiki or Wikimedia Commons - a complete list with wiki projects can be found on the Wiki Community page [link.012]. The flagship of the wiki-world and the application which shows best the massive potential of collaborative media is Wikipedia. Launched in 2001, Wikipedia is the attempt to gather the world's knowledge into an encyclopedic form: "It is an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language" (Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia).

According to the main principle of wikis it is completely written collaboratively, built up by everyone with interest and with an internet connection. Wikipedia now has more than 2,000,000 articles in about 200 different languages, including 850,000 in the English-language version (as at December 2005) [fig.002].

Browser-based, open-source, ease-of-use and supported by a strong and active community: those are the determining factors for any kind of social software. They act as a door-opener for a more participatory use of the internet and enable it to function as a platform, that allows collaborative authoring for a world-wide general public.

At recent conferences the expression "Web 2.0" was introduced in order to value this shift as the most significant since the advent of the internet. The future will show if the leap was important enough to account for a new version number of the already fifteen-year-old internet. But as long as there are enthusiasts to keep it running and improving it, this will most likely be the case.

3. Two international internet projects at NID

Both projects applied some of the latest internet techniques for communication and collaboration as described above. The students used traditional server technology with FTP up-/downloading, email, chat, instant messaging, video conferencing and a wiki to develop their projects.



[link.012]
<http://www.communitywiki.org>



[fig.002]
 "Imagine a world in which every person has free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we are doing" (Wikimedia Foundation)

Web 2.0
 It is not very clear, what all comes under this expression. Different people use it differently, it also has become a buzzword for marketing. Tim O'Reilly wrote a seminal paper about it on September 30, 2005:
 "What is Web 2.0 - Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software"
 [link.013]
<http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/6228>

3.1. "Crossing paths" - Exchange project 'Basel-Nagaoka'

This project was held during winter vacation in February and March 2005. Thirteen students of the multimedia design class at the Art School of Basle in Switzerland and nine third year students of the NID participated in the project. Midway through the project they were organized in seven groups. Each of the groups then developed an autonomous project, ranging between art and design. For the Swiss students the work was done during regular classes at school with their teacher Claudia Guedel. I was guiding the project in Nagaoka, and sometimes online from Tokyo. In terms of content the participating students were exploring their daily route to school and experiencing with visual forms to depict the findings.

I launched the project with presentations out of my map collection. For me, it seemed appropriate in many ways. First, a map is in the same position as a student in this project: they both had to impart reality and both were obliged to use a visual language to do so. Their respective addressees are unknown people, thus the way to communicate had to be held in an objective way to be understood. Then of course, the theme of the project "route to school" literally implied to *map out* this part of one's daily routine.

In the first phase of the project each student presented his/her route to school in a simple Flash animation. Besides all concerns of understandability, students were urged to give their commuting to school a rather personal expression, an individual twist. After being uploaded on the server those movies became visible to everybody in the project. [fig.003]

Based on these individual animations, the groups were formed together with all participants via a live chat event.

In the second phase, the groups tried to cross, overlay and merge the original animations of its members, creating a fusion and aiming at new dimensions in the group work. This was the crucial part of the project: in order to develop the group project, the students were forced to find a



[fig.003] Clippings out of the Flash Animations of the project



[fig.004] During the video conference, which for technical reasons had to be held at home and not at either of the two schools.

common language for communication. Like in ordinary meetings ideas were exchanged, directions proposed, visual sketches and test files presented; only, in order to connect the project partners and their endeavours, here the internet and its tools served as the "meeting table".

The internal presentation of the resulting products was held with the aid of a video conferencing system. Each party had a live stream video from their 10'000 km separated counterpart. After two months of shared work, discussions, tears and laughter, the group members of the two countries were able to see each other for the first time [fig.004].

Both phases of the project are still visible on the internet on our project website [link.014].

[link.014]
<http://c-shop.ch/basel-nagaoka>

The third phase of the project was held by the Swiss students only. Under the special guidance of two local media artists the flash movies of the group works were translated again into 3D space [fig.005].

"to seduce ... to travel ... to navigate" was the title of the public opening at "plug.in", a gallery for interactive art works in Basle. Then, not only the final works but the whole course of the project were presented [link.015] and [link.016].

[link.015]
<http://www.weallplugin.org>
[link.016]
<http://welcome.weallplugin.org/calendar/Event.2005-01-26.4906/fla>



[fig.005]

Impressions from the exhibition of the project works at plug.in, an art space for interactive art and research in Basle.

3.2. "Looking East" - Flash-Illustrations for the Vodafone Receiver magazine

A group of NID students designed Flash movies as illustrations for the online magazine "receiver". The students could experience a real work assignment with a foreign company and even received a small compensation for their collaboration. Tomo Makabe and me were responsible for the coordination. The communication with the project leader and the to and fro with the movie files was handled by wiki pages.

The students of NID had been collaborating on issue No. 13 of the receiver magazine, published in July 2005. Any issue so far can be accessed from the "archive" of the receiver homepage [link.018]. Our collaboration can be opened directly in its own window through [link.019].

Receiver is the international web magazine of the Vodafone Corporation, UK. It has been published since May 2000, several times a year, and each issue basically contains nine articles written by 'pioneer thinkers', academics, artists or people from the business world. Those articles deal with communication technologies - especially mobile media - and their impact on today's society. In December 2005 the latest issue, receiver # 14, was published [link.016].

[link.017]
<http://www.receiver.vodafone.com>
[link.018]
<http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/archive>
[link.019]
<http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/13>

An independent office in Frankfurt is responsible for the publishing processes and their man in charge, Max Wolf, approached the NID Digital Design Course with a request for collaboration. For every issue of receiver he assigns the illustration work to students of a different design or art school. So far respectable educational institutions from Berlin, Köln, London, Paris, Barcelona, Rotterdam, etc. were accounted for the task. Nagaoka Institute of Design was the first school outside of Europe to be committed, and we gladly seized the opportunity to give the students some real-world experience in multimedia design assignments - and our school an additional international appearance.

The project started with the toughest part for the students: to get an idea of what the articles were about. However, each student somehow managed to get through it and the illustration work for the chosen text could be started. One of the conditions was, that the illustrations had to be more than a static image, like an animation or an interactive flash movie. In addition, Max Wolf urged us to include a local flavour in the art works. Fortunately, he was not too strict about the relationship between the illustrations and the articles.

Original articles, idea sketches, test files and then the final art work: all the sending and receiving was done easily by an interface on one of the project's original wiki pages. The "Gallery Page" was for the upload of the illustrations. Any project participant could access all of the art works through this page [fig.006]. On the "Commented Ideas Page" Max Wolf could add his comments and suggestions during the creation process. Of course, there was space for the students' remarks too. [fig.007]

With the usual flurry in the last days before the deadline, we managed to have the illustrations uploaded on time. Max Wolf was very pleased with the results, praising their originality and an "asian taste". He was also happy about the smooth proceeding without delays.



[fig.006 and fig.007] Excerpts from the projects' wiki-pages, through which most of the communication has been channeled



[fig.008] Three still images out from the students illustrations as well as the menubar, through which the movies together with the related articles can be accessed.

4. Conclusion

Communication is the mutual exchange of information, thoughts or feelings in a common system of symbols. According to circumstances this system can be a highly coded one, but verbal language is the dominating form.

What else do we need for a successful exchange of those "codes"? Above all and in any case we cannot do it without a medium; even direct speech depends on air in order to transport sound waves. For a long time now, we have gotten used to complicated technical media for communication purposes, - and we have also learned to adapt our communication styles according to their shortcomings and requirements. In addition, cognitive and psychological preconditions are necessary to communicate: a person in a communication situation has to understand and process information which is outside of his/her own system and must have the attitude to do so by having a motive or motivation. Considering all this, we are confronted with a rather tricky process, based on not too few conditions.

By creating a setting, as in the two projects, I put the students in a situation with many obstacles. They could not resort to established communication strategies, because the entire exchange had to be done solely with foreigners. Mother language, social codes and cultural consent ceased to apply. A very abstract technical medium with unknown interfaces and behaviour became essential and was indispensable for a successful exchange. Especially the students from the Japanese side had to mobilise additional motivation, because both of the projects were held outside their regular classes on a voluntary basis, during their free time.

On the other hand it was an unique chance to train one's communication skills in an extraordinary situation. Thinking of new and untested forms to get ideas across, dealing with unexpected proposals from the counterparts, unforeseen turns of the project due to misunderstandings might add to one's flexibility and lead to a lightness of communication in day-to-day situations too. The prospect to learn the handling of new and emerging technologies might also have helped to find additional motivation. But above all, the occasion to learn about a foreign culture first hand and in a working process must have persuaded the participants. Fortunately the students valued those advantages enough to bring the projects to satisfying ends.

I don't want to give the impression, that the technical inventions, as described in "2. Internet as a collaborative medium for communication" is the direct cause of

social changes. Technology is a part of society, well embedded in it and therefore as much an expression of a society's orientation as its motor. It can be seen as a mutual give and take: technical innovations only become mass phenomena, when the social ground is prepared for it. On the other hand each society needs technical innovations to make steps, to advance.

So, rather than being worried about limited knowledge of technical contexts in the projects, I have learned to pay more attention to the situation in which things are supposed to happen. If the setting is based on an environment appropriate enough, anything can be stimulated: curiosity, learning, innovations, love, improvement of society.

However, this will not happen by its own, like the transformation of the internet into an open and participative medium, the effort of all the people concerned is indispensable.

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