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THE INTERNET ARCADE: WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE SOCIAL INTERNET

A Thesis Presented

by

Matthew Shagam

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English**

May, 2008

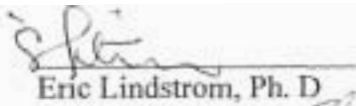
Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, specializing in English.

Thesis Examination Committee:

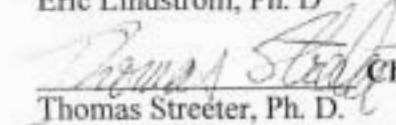


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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, the work of Walter Benjamin is examined for relationships to developments in internet culture and societies. Beginning with Benjamin's use of allegories in illuminating the growth of bourgeois culture in 19th century Paris, particularly the flaneur, the feuilletonist, and the sandwichboardman, this thesis then moves to discuss the relationship between Benjamin's method and how they can show structures in the formation and attraction of social aggregator websites (also known as social bookmarking) and social networking.

The first part of the thesis discusses social aggregators, in particular the websites reddit, Digg, and MetaFilter. This section examines the history and development of these sites, how they work, and what the community response to them has so far been, before moving into a discussion of how these structures affect the individual user. The individual user on these sites is seen as analogous to the flaneur, who in strolling through the crowds served an economic purpose of making their consumption public. In this manner, the user turns "slack" (as the site reddit puts it) into economic work. The transformation of this slack into economic benefit is seen as belonging to an economic cycle first developed by Benjamin to explain the work of the feuilletonist and the decline of the visual aspect of this cycle from the extravagant flaneur to the destitute sandwichboardman.

The second part of the thesis explores the history and technology of social networking, in particular the websites LiveJournal, MySpace, and Facebook. Here the sites are discussed in light of Benjamin's elucidation of the development of the bourgeois individual, particularly in the aspects of the bourgeois collector and the evolution of the private interior. In particular, the arcades of 19th century Paris are seen as being instructional as to how to be a modern, urban individual; the social networking site is seen as serving an analogous purpose for training individuals how to be modern, digital citizens. Finally, Benjamin's technique of the allegory, while useful in highlighting certain trends in social networking is seen as being pushed to its limits in addressing the rhetoric of a dominant ideology in digital life, that of technolibertarianism/transhumanism.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, without whose assistance I could not have complete this project, and to my advisor, Dr. Richard Parent, whose advice and insights have made this work far better than it would have been otherwise.

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INTRODUCTION

In his unfinished *Passagenwerk*¹, Walter Benjamin planned to examine the relationship between the social pressures of urbanity during the industrial revolution. Particularly, he examined the places where the French began to shop - enclosed arcades analogous to today's mall. The threads he discovered showed the need of industry for sustained demand, which he wove together, finding a new social tapestry, where fashion - the changing of styles for the sake of changing them - served as that sustainer, as well as acculturated rural immigrants to urban life, anesthetized the shocks of modern urbanity, and formed a new psychology of consumption in the lives of the bourgeoisie. These effects, he believed, were felt by the individuals through phantasmagorias of new visual² and information³ technologies - particularly those which enhanced both perception and information together. Due to the technical character of his interests, and the fact that he preserved in the *Passagenwerk* a tremendous amount of his original sources, many of the observations Benjamin made remain relevant, and indeed, can reveal fascinating aspects of the Social Networking (SN) and the Social Aggregator (SA) sites.

Benjamin's analysis of consumption differed from that of previous Marxian scholars, in essentially leaving aside questions of production, surplus, and expropriation in favor of asking what were the social elements not of production, but of stimulating evermore precise, expensive, and signficatory consumption. In this regard, he, borrowing from Baudelaire, worked with "allegories", or types of individuals common to French life in the 19th Century; for example, Benjamin considered the *flaneur* and his extravagant

¹ Throughout this work, the edition of the *Passagenwerk* used is Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999

² Such as the lithograph, the stereoscope/stereopticon, the magic lantern, photography, etc.

³ Such as the industrial printing press, the telegraph/telephone, networked reporters, color printing, etc.

clothing as both emblematic of arcades consumption and an irritant of sorts to the average passerby that fueled further consumption - against this, he presented the sandwichboardman, who fuelled a similar, yet degraded level of existence towards the decline of the arcades. It is this usage of allegories which will allow a certain understanding of internet sociality beyond either the raw statistics and data constantly churned out by computers or the individual anecdotes of single users.

In the first chapter, the SA site is examined with the intent of demonstrating how the *feullitonist* and the *flaneur* both give the modern critic of such sites a means of relating the various features and characteristics of the sites in a more coherent manner. Essentially, the SA presents the visitor with a series of links, which are organized by various means on the individual sites; the SA gets these links from various users who have registered with the site, and submit them in return for a measure of notoriety and communal reward. What occurs here is a re-updating of the “phantasmagoric economy” Benjamin posits as occurring in the cycle of the *flaneur* and the subsequent observations of the *flaneur* by the *feullitonist*. In the second chapter, the SN site presents an analogous situation to the interior which constituted the space, for Benjamin, for the collector and the development of the bourgeois individual in general; but, here, because of various technical and legal structures underlying the SN site, the capacities of these analogies are pushed to their limits, with the SN ultimately heralding a new, and equally troubling and promising future for the relationship of the individual to their possessions and roles.

In both SN and SA sites, "social" is meant to include certain features; namely, the ability of users to take on permanent identities,⁴ find and communicate with other users, and to perform some certain task - whether posting and watching videos on *MySpace*, or

⁴ Limited, as will be seen, by various legal regimes and technical capacities.

posting and commenting on news stories on *Reddit*. There are certain social features in common on all of the discussed sites, but this does not immediately correspond with the conventional usage of social. The experienced consequences of these mediated communications and activities are quite unexpected. As an example, it's fairly unusual to think of "social" in terms of temporal aspects of interaction - i.e., one does not usually define friendship by the number of times one meets a person, but rather by the depth of affect one has for that friend - the constant updating of status (*Facebook*), notification of activity (*MySpace*), or the appearance of friends in third-party pictures (*Facebook*) makes apparent the actual frequency of social interaction.

Currently, the number of these sites is booming; *Facebook* has at least 39 million members, and *MySpace* created its 100 millionth profile in 2006; *reddit*, at the time of its funding, was receiving seventy thousands unique hits a day, while *digg* passed a million registered users in March, 2007. A comprehensive review of SN sites⁵ found at least forty as of the end of 2006, while a current aggregator of SA sites⁶ combs sixteen. In considering the wide array of possible choices for study, it is necessary to limit the examination to a few, yet widely popular choices of social networking websites; furthermore it is necessary to delineate between a wide variety of sites which fall under this rubric. For immediate purposes, the objects of examination are the "classic" social networking (hereafter, SN) website, as defined by elements which will shortly be elaborated, and the social aggregator website (SA, also known as social bookmarking or social news). Currently the most popular SN websites, and therefore, the objects of

5 boyd, d. m. [sic], & Ellison, N. B. "Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 2007. Available at <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>

6 *OnlyWire*. Available at <http://www.onlywire.com/>

examination (by numbers of users) are, in no particular order, *Facebook*, *MySpace*, and *LiveJournal*, while for social aggregators the websites examined are, again, in no particular order, *Digg*, *reddit*, and *MetaFilter*⁷.

As a final, if unfortunately long, prefatory note, it is necessary to lay out something of the programs of SN and SA sites. Regarding the SN site, aside from the nominal direct forms of contact through the sites⁸, there are innumerable other forms of contact through the default structures of the site, the ASP⁹ programs. This stems from the technical conventions which underlies most of the current boom in social websites, which generally, and depending on the feature, debatably, fall under the rubric of "Web 2.0". While "Web 2.0", remains a vague and controversial term, a few general statements can be made about how this series of technical standards and design principles orders many of the similarities about these sites. "Web 2.0" comes from the belief that computers are generally very good at sorting through huge amounts of carefully arranged data, and very poor at coping with irregularities and inconsistencies within that data; in other words, computers are very good at organizing photographs by title rapidly, but extremely poor at identifying the content of that data in a readily comprehensible way to their users. Google can find "goya.jpg" almost instantly; but it could not identify "3rd of May" as being by the same painter as "The Maias" from the content of the image itself. The result is that "Web 2.0", through XML and other sorts of "tagging", attempts to make data available to computers by adding as much contextual data as possible to that

⁷ Respectively available at: www.facebook.com, www.myspace.com, www.livejournal.com, digg.com, reddit.com, and www.metafilter.com.

⁸ Such as an internal instant messenger, in-site email clients, and public message boards.

⁹ Application Service Provider. An ASP is a company that creates various pieces of software to handle regular tasks; in business, this could mean anything from payroll entry to personnel filing, while in terms of SN and SA, it refers to the series of programs which underlie the sites.

file, such that Google could then identify "3rd of May" and "The Maias" as Goya's by their various tags of [Goya] [painting] [spanish] [art], etc. The second relevant approach of "Web 2.0" design is that databases should be compatible with each other through common "application programming interfaces" (API). This means that, for example, the database which underlies Google Earth is available to users outside of Google, leading to such programs, run by ASP's, that do such things as let one see the locations of all the Starbucks in the United States, search for a plane crash (as recently happened with Steve Fossett's downed plane), find the value of a neighbor's house, or locate all the sexual offenders in a given neighborhood. At each point where these tags enter into other databases, another tracking piece of information is created, meaning that the usage of the sites produce genuine information not merely in terms of their tagging or their APIs, but also in terms of how users act on the tags, the API's, and both together. The consequence of this is discussed in more detail below; in short, the data automatically produced from Web 2.0 represents a ground for a new balances of the information-observation-commercial usage - information triangle Benjamin posited in the development of the *flaneur* and the *feuilletonist*.

The SA site primarily consists of a series of links to other sites, provided and voted upon by the various individuals of the site; for example, the SA *reddit* consists of main page, which lists a number of brief descriptions of links to such things as news articles, blog posts, government reports, videos, games, comments on the site itself, and photographs, among other things. Next to each link is an up-arrow and a down-arrow, allowing the visitor, on registering, to vote on the link, either sending it up the list of links, or down. Also, a "comment" link beneath each link takes the viewer to a page within *reddit* where various users discuss the link itself, which oftentimes become the subjects of

main page links themselves. Finally, *reddit* contains a category tag, so that, for example, an analysis of a presidential election poll is tagged with a "politics" label, which allows the viewer to either look for only "politics", or eliminate "politics" tagged links from their personalized main page. The "front" main page - the main page a viewer is taken to when first going to *reddit* - contains only the most popular stories, popular being determined by a proprietary algorithm which basically divides the number of positive votes - the upvotes minus the downvotes - by the amount of time that the link has been available on the site, meaning that the content of the site is dynamic, and determined by the combination of individual registered votes and the automatic determinations of the algorithm. Of the other two examined sites, *Digg* is similarly designed, while *MetaFilter* uses a "one user, one link per day" method to determine what reaches the front page, with a one-time charge of five dollars for each new user, to keep the website from being overrun by spammers, advertisers, hackers, pranksters, and the "unserious" linker. Users who submit stories that reach the "front" page are rewarded with various points of "karma" (in the example of *reddit*, but which can also be found on the SA sites *www.slashdot.org* and *www.kuro5hin.org*) which gives those users with high karma the ability to launch new links not into the "new submissions" page - where stories often never receive more than one or two votes - but instead into, if their karma is high enough, the "front" page itself.

In general, the content of these SA approximates that of a conventional newspaper, and even vaguely approximates it structurally, with the sites being divided into a front page, sub-category pages, and indexes. The content covers the same general areas as that of a newspaper, (with allowance for internet-specific media and memes,) and the revenue streams of *Digg* and *reddit* largely, like conventional newspapers, come from

advertising. With that said, the sites are in other regards drastically different from newspapers, particularly in that SA sites don't contract for original material, they do not have professional, official editors determining content, they update dynamically, and finally, they relinquish control over content from human to a hybrid human-algorithm balance. Perhaps the best analogy for how the "democracy" of sites like *Digg* and *reddit* work is that of the Electoral College, whereby direct democracy is mediated by a set of intermediate rules to produce a result which can differ from "the will of the people", in that a link with a small number of positive votes newly submitted can rank higher than an older link with a large number of positive votes. Unfortunately, there has yet to be a study on the financial aspects of these sites, so it is impossible to say how viable the sites currently are for producers of original content. Certainly, they have contributed to the ability of various individual sites to become the sole employment of their creators; for example, the webcomics *Penny Arcade*, *Achewood*, and *Toothpaste for Dinner* all support their creators and have strong presences on various SA, while the blog *zenhabits.net* is an example of a popular submitter on SA sites which recently became profitable enough to allow its creator to quit their regular employment. Regardless, given the number of users, the interest shown to the largest of the SA sites, and the increasing difficulty of traditional media to handle the demands of consumers for more points-of-view, more analysis, and more novelty, the SA site appears as a viable, long-term phenomenon.

Between the sensorial phantasmagoria of the Arcades and the informational phantasmagoria of the internet is the connection of the individual attempting a construction of an identity through the novel materials of their age; whether it is the *flaneur* exhibiting the latest in imported fabric, or the user hacking their *MySpace* page to show more than the default eight "top friends", the relationship between personal

display, observation by third parties, the consequent analysis of those displays by third parties, and the return of that observation into the subsequent portrayals of the individual remains constant. What changes with the internet are the number of means by which this cycle operates, the tempo, and - most drastically, troublingly, and promisingly - the extent to which the information media can maintain the actions of the individual in memory, not as an anonymous member of a crowd, but as the individual his- or herself.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SOCIAL AGGREGATOR AND THE CYCLE OF INFORMATION

On December 5th, 2004, *Digg* launched, supposedly off of a few hundred dollars. Within a year, it received \$2.8 million in venture capital; on August 14th, *BusinessWeek* put co-founder Kevin Rose's share of *Digg*'s value at \$60 million, as rumors swirled about a \$300 million buyout, off of an annual \$3 million in revenues.¹⁰ In July 2005, *reddit* launched; claiming over one million unique visitors a month¹¹, in October, 2006 *reddit* was purchased by the Conde-Nast publishing group for an undisclosed amount certainly greater than the initial \$100,000 venture capital loan. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these hefty financial investments in SA sites is that none of them "make" anything in a conventional sense; SA sites generally produce no original content, provide no analysis of trends and data, and guard their own proprietary data tightly. All that the investors were buying in the SA site was essentially a set of rules governing the posting of links and comments, along with the necessary bandwidth. SA sites are relatively simple to design and implement, especially when compared with the massive infrastructure and hosting capacity required for other Web 2.0 sites such as *YouTube* and the larger SN sites (*Facebook*, *MySpace*, etc).

As such, the SA sites were purchased not so much for any technical reason, but for the personalities exhibited by their respective communities¹²; as a brief survey of sites reveals the distinctive subcultures of each: *hackernews*, started by the venture capital company Y Combinator¹³, serves a community familiar with software programming and the business

¹⁰ Lacy, Sarah and Hempel, Jessi. "Valley Boys", *BusinessWeek*. August 14th, 2006. Available at http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_33/b3997001.htm

¹¹ http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/wired_acquires_reddit.php

¹² Especially since the two "democratic" SA sites discussed here, *Digg* and *reddit*, keep their algorithms top-secret, as releasing them would mean that third parties could manipulate them to catapult stories to the front page. It is unlikely that in the near future any but the most basic and outdated algorithms will make their way into the public; therefore, a user who thinks "*Digg* is better than *reddit* does so for only aesthetic, personal, and purely speculative reasons.

¹³ <http://news.ycombinator.com/>

side of the IT industry; *4-Chan*'s “/b/”¹⁴ is known for obscene and juvenile humor (as well as the occasional activist raid against white supremacists¹⁵ and the Church of Scientology¹⁶); *StumbleUpon*¹⁷ is best known for its video content - a SA site version of *YouTube*. Of the main pages under examination, *reddit* has recently become known as a large base of support for both minor presidential candidates Ron Paul and Dennis Kucinich, while *Digg*, which imposes certain restrictions on content through the occasional editorship of the site's owner presents more mainstream news and entertainment links. *MetaFilter* has a reputation for both its more cultural and literary links, and for its style of embedding multiple links in the description, while the description itself is looked more highly upon if it has an ambiguous, lyrical form rather than a straight forward listing of what the user will see when they click on the link.

Beneath the “personalities” of the communities of these SA sites are the algorithms; each site has its own proprietary algorithms, but some things remain in common across the newer SA sites. The foremost element is that of voting; stories users like, get voted up, stories they don't get voted down, and the most popular story makes its way to the front page. This means that the SA site is constantly changing, as opposed to regularly changing, on a predictable schedule, like a newspaper. While it has been long bemoaned that the internet makes it possible for a given user to lock themselves into information channels which only reinforce their own worldview, the reality is that in using SA sites, because of the constantly present turnover in stories built in from the design rules, novelty and diversity are necessary and inevitable. Novelty and diversity then serve as a check on the stagnation of the content on a SA site, which is further

¹⁴ <http://img.4chan.org/b/imgboard.html>

¹⁵ http://dockets.justia.com/docket/court-njdce/case_no-2:2007cv00306/case_id-198438/

¹⁶ <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/canada/story.html?id=261308>

¹⁷ <http://www.stumbleupon.com>

avoided by the effects of mis-description¹⁸, spamming, “trolling”¹⁹, and the occasional inter-SA “flame”²⁰ war. The subsequent effect of this is a “phantasmagoria” of information, where information is presented abstracted from the content of the original host, and where the temporal structures of the sites give the information an illusion of dynamism and independence that gestures towards larger ideologies of technological progress - such as transhumanism - while keeping that information nonetheless locked into the structures of market exchange that Benjamin finds first developed in the arcades.

As a last introductory note, each of these sites allows commenting on links; however, *MetaFilter* simply logs the links in their chronological order; *Digg* and *reddit* each allow for “voting” on comments²¹. This final aspect means that aside from the hosting aspects of the site²², virtually everything one comes to an SA site for is user-community determined. Furthermore, what one sees in terms of content is always dynamic, undergoing constant revision from the users. This constant revision is what makes these sites genuinely new, or at least unique in comparison with previous media; one is used to regular revision - newspapers do that on a daily basis, while television news channels schedule regular slots for various programs. While the turnover on either *Digg* or *reddit* may not completely the complete revision of the entirety of links each time either loads, there is, given enough users - which both of the sites at hand have - dynamism enough between refresh clicks that SA sites present new challenges in

¹⁸ A recent example of this is the practice of “rickrolling”, in which a user clicks on a link relevant to their personal interests, and is instead taken to Rick Astley’s music video for his 1980’s hit “Never Gonna Give You Up”.

¹⁹ The practice of posting intentionally inflammatory material simply to cause a ruckus.

²⁰ “Flaming” is the practice of intentionally insulting someone, while a “flame war” is a disagreement that has descended into the worst forms of personal insulting.

²¹ *Digg*, in keeping with its “shovel” based theme, terms down-voting “bury”, while *reddit* uses the terms “upmod” and “downmod”

²² Hosting issues include designing the algorithms which underlie the voting mechanisms, the appearance of the site, maintaining the integrity of the site from hackers, spammers, etc., and enabling a search option; while these are considerable issues, it helps to keep in mind that *reddit* handled a million unique hits a month with only four employees in 2005-2006.

discussing the distribution of information - indeed, they very well might be the first form of media for which the famous "falling letters" screen from *The Matrix* is not a metaphor, but rather an archetype. In contrast, even the most dynamic previous media, (with the exception of "breaking" news, usually in the context of a massive event) repeat information; for example, CNN Headline News repeats a half-hour block of news that changes only every six hours. Everything short of 24-hour news can only distribute information in the context of regularly scheduled times. As such, anyone looking for novelty has to wait; not with the SA site, where a large amount of novel links are "on tap."

The Automatic Editor and The Demanding Crowd: The SA Site at Present

Given the structural aspects of hosting are less important than the "personalities" of the various SA sites (with the exception of the ranking algorithm), two main themes deserve elucidation - the questions concerning editorship and the "commentariat"/users, and questions concerning the "exteriorization" of content as that interacts with the dynamic algorithms of the individual sites.

The exteriorization of information on SN site means that only rarely does a link refer to somewhere else on the SN site itself, and when it does so, it usually is limited to questions concerning the SN site itself.²³ There is, however, a constant debate in the commentary of links on the process of editorship and support for the information that the community, through the decisions of various users and the hosts of the sites, decides is worth reading. These questions of editorship here concern two things - claims to "authentically" represent the will of the users of the site, and debates among users as to what constitutes information which should and should not make it from the "bottom" of the site (i.e., just submitted links) to the top. This debate is one in which the users

²³ Of the three SN sites discussed, only *reddit* allows links from within itself to be main page links.

attempt to define exactly what it is that they wish to see, how they wish to see it, and who has or should have the most impact in making these decisions; interestingly, because the site depends so much on the users for content, this blurs the distinction between who really “works” for the SN site. Granted, Conde-Nast owns *reddit*; but they produce very little for it, and certainly nothing under a *reddit* title. This further means, as will be shown below, that the questions of “leisure” (or “slack”, as *reddit* terms it) which were so crucial in Benjamin’s examination of the social significance of the *flaneur* return in the SN site user.

Questions concerning the dynamics of the sites generally are more technical. An analogy for the difference between the questions of community editorship and algorithmic dynamism might be the difference between debating differences between the policies of two politicians, and debating how the mechanics of an election should run; in the first the political is reflected in terms of the consequences of policies, while in the other the political is reflected in terms of what the structures of a given political system will allow to be debated as policy.

The various sites themselves have approached these questions in direct relation to the order of their creation; *MetaFilter*, the oldest of the sites, is perhaps the simplest to understand, and certainly the simplest in terms of design, content, and community. The “one user, one link, one day” method keeps the site relatively clean of “spam” or “link-jacking”²⁴, i.e., the practice of individuals interested in making money off of various links submitting either links repeatedly under different tag descriptions, or “linking-through” other sites to the original site paying for the spammer to link them. Furthermore, the fact that it charges a one-time fee to join means that individuals have a small, yet real, incentive both to use the site and return to it. The trade-off for this arrangement reveals

²⁴ Discussed in more detail below.

itself in the fact that it carries a radically smaller number of links on a daily basis - a random survey of the number of links hosted through the week of 1-17-08 through 1-24-08 reveals there were an average of 25-26 topics submitted a day; while this does not capture the full number - since each topic may consist of a single link, or several, and therefore each user has approximately a paragraph's space to work with, and may include multiple links within that space - the potential number of submissions has a ceiling in that the number of submissions in a day cannot exceed the number of members. Against that, a quick check of *reddit*'s new submissions page reveals that at least 34 links were submitted within the space of a given hour (5:32 pm e.s.t., 1-24-08); even this is a low estimate, as topics which get voted up quickly leave the new submissions page for higher up towards the main page. This turnover means that while *MetaFilter*, which has a much more coherent community, tends to present links which are generally distinct, novel, and thematically organized has therefore a far lower "churn", or updating, factor as compared with *reddit*. The implication of this is that structural choices regarding using algorithms among SA sites come to determine the content of the site above-and-beyond what may occur in terms of user base and community choices; the limited turnover means that *MetaFilter* comes to approximate something like a magazine, or a specialty television channel, with topics given more space for description, more in-depth linkage, and generally more reflective links. Against this, *reddit*'s constant turnover - it is quite possible to refresh the site every five minutes and see significant changes in the ranking of links - makes it analogically closer to newspapers or 24-hour news networks, where the links are much more topical and reflect the immediate interests of users.

The temporal aspect of the SA site, as well as the differences in ability to join mean that the comments and debates about topics take on a very different character.

There is almost never any debate on *MetaFilter* about what should or should not be posted on the main page; the community rather comes to debate whether or not a given link adequately represents what its poster intended, while on *reddit* there are continual debates over whether or not the user-base of the site has distinct biases. Such debates are reflected in the very description of the links, which often take on the snowclone²⁵ form of "X happens; but it does not happen to Y, so *reddit* does not care." Recent topics following this formula have included the exchange parity of the US dollar to the Canadian, media reports about Ron Paul, (as opposed to other candidates,) and acts of discrimination against atheists by christians (as opposed to other religions.)²⁶ As of this writing, a current recurring topic covers "Project Chanology"²⁷, a "war" between various loosely allied hackers, pranksters, and "griefers" going under the name ANONYMOUS against Scientology over Scientology's aggressive policy of suppression of unfavorable and proprietary materials through litigation; concerning this topic, posts include questioning whether Scientology is really more dangerous than christianity (following the snowclone formula given above), and whether or not Scientology has the right to pursue such "chilling-effect" actions (also following the above snowclone form.) Another aspect of this temporal structure is that *reddit* often has multiple submissions of a given news story - as of this writing, the withdrawal of Dennis Kucinich from the Democratic primaries has at least six separate submitted links; while this often leads to submissions

²⁵ A snowclone is a form of cliché which uses paraphrases of common sayings, such as "If Eskimos have N words for snow, X surely have Y words for Z." Further elaboration can be found at <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageelog/archives/000350.html>

²⁶ As of 2/24/08, counts for the topics by searching *reddit* are: 30 (Canadian Dollar), 9310 (Ron Paul), and 1010 (Atheism v. Christianity). Respectively available at: <http://reddit.com/search?q=%22canadian+dollar%22>
<http://reddit.com/search?q=Ron+Paul>
<http://reddit.com/search?q=christianity+atheism>

²⁷ <http://reddit.com/search?q=chanology>; 10 hits. As for "anonymous" and "scientology", 100 hits; available at <http://reddit.com/search?advanced=True&all=scientology+anonymous&any=&phrase=&except=&author=&domain=>

of the snowclone form "We know x is y; check to see if anyone else has submitted first," making its way up the site, this does produce one quite interesting effect of making differences in coverage between various news sources instantly available, which then often makes for submissions on their own.

A result of this constant turnover is that "community consciousness" takes on a new approach; while one can of course use the sites to observe the concerns of a given community, one gets a view of the concerns of the community as a temporal aspect in real time. For example, the burst of stories about Kucinich's resignation from the Democratic primary represents a synchronous "burst of consciousness" across sources of media, rather than what occurs normally in media, which is linearized to one distribution channel at a time - as in television news channels - or else topicalized - as in themed channels, such as the financial concerns of CNBC, the *Wall Street Journal*, etc. As such, comparisons are not merely the possibility of an interested party, but rather, mandatory as part of the structure of the SA itself. This produces an immediate "physiognomy" of the media environment; one is forced to choose between coverage presented by various interested groups. It is interesting, if speculative, to consider this physiognomy, based on an algorithm as it is, as showing insight into something almost like a psychology of cyborg, if not a machine itself.

As an example of this, the day that Dennis Kucinich left the Democratic Presidential Primary, several several links referred to various stories about his departure; between them, an individual could choose among the *New York Times*' coverage, CNN's coverage, and the coverage of two separate blogs, one the liberal *A Corporate Mediocracy*

(*CM*), the other the conservative *Republican Ranting (RR)*²⁸. While the link descriptions themselves are written by the submitter, not the site which hosts the relevant information, the link to the site is listed beneath that description, meaning that while the immediate comparisons between sites is to a degree obscured by the limitations of the description (These descriptions are limited to only a few dozen characters, for the sake of keeping the site down to the minimum bandwidth requirements) the availability of choice, and the fact that the community has decided that this given take on the event is worthwhile, means that there is a constant evaluation of the approaches to a given event which is not limited to a single world-view. In the Kucinich example, various elements of the community supported four different approaches to the same event; one in the manner of the “paper of record” (*NYT*), a very “objective” approach which eschewed trying to place the departure in a larger context but merely explained Kucinich’s departing statements and listed the impact that the departure would have on the remaining candidates and the basic structure of the race at large; an “Up-To-The Minute” approach (*CNN*) which developed the story in a similarly objective manner to the *NYT*, but also included links to *CNN*’s in-house political pundits and interactive resources for examining Kucinich’s political history, electoral victories, and campaign background; an approach from a liberal site (*CM*), with the accompanying comments from the *CM*’s generally liberal readership; and an approach from what could be considered the direct opposite political opinion from that of Kucinich (*RR*), with all that that perspective entails.

The consequence of this is to reveal parallel information and discussions which

²⁸ Respectively available at:

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/24/kucinich-to-drop-out-of-presidential-race/index.html?hp>

<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/01/24/kucinich-getting-out/>

<http://corporate-elections.blogspot.com/>

<http://inkslwc.wordpress.com/2008/01/25/dennis-kucinich-surprisingly-drops-out-of-the-presidential-race/>

Note: *CM* appears to have changed its material since the date of that post; while the site still appears when “kucinich drops out” is searched on *reddit*, the link target no longer contains any information relevant to Kucinich. All other sites still remain valid.

would otherwise not overlap each other; this furthermore avoids a “problem” often brought up by various commentators on online life, that of individuals getting locked into information sources which only confirm their previously held ideas.²⁹ For example, it is possible for a liberal only to read liberal blogs, news sources, and think tanks, in which case that individual supposedly is less informed and challenged than if they had read from a traditional newspaper or television channel, which would host opinions from across the political spectrum, in the manner of, for example, the *NYT*’s editorial page, which includes writers from various professions and political persuasions. The SA site provides this spectrum of difference, and potentially can do so to a greater degree than traditional media, for a number of reasons. First, the SA site, being merely the means of linking sites, and not the actual provider of information, has a much lower “cost of entry” for various positions; secondly, the ranking of links is dynamic, meaning that not only are breaking stories immediately brought to the attention of the community - but that the comparisons across various viewpoints are brought up as well, while traditional media can only present different viewpoints linearly, that is, one right after the other. Finally, the SA site structurally includes a democratic evaluation of the content of the links, meaning that the content of a given link is popular not merely because of the presumptions of a given editor or editorial board, but rather by the consensus of a large number of interested individuals. As such, what makes the cut is more in keeping with the *zeitgeist* of a self-selecting community; if *Wikipedia* represents the sum of all user-generated expertise, then the SA site represents its journalism.

Each of these reasons alone would make the SA a different informational source from traditional media. The fact that the SA has no costs in terms of producing stories is an extremely valuable aspect, in terms of allowing “amateur” stories to be heard. For

²⁹ There is even now a SA site for SA sites that constantly updates the most popular stories from at least a dozen SA sites: <http://needfornews.com/>

example, the *NYT* must pay at least several hundred dollars per original story, when the salaries of a reporter, editor, printer, and the overhead of maintaining the physical plant of the *NYT* - not to mention turning a profit - are all taken into account. The SA site, in comparison to all of this, pays only a virtually incalculable fraction of this cost per story, having only its own hosting, bandwidth, and overhead to pay. As a result, what is valuable to the SA is not what the content is itself, per se, - it does not matter to the SA whether a story might or might not be Pulitzer Prize-worthy, whether it is produced by an expert or a novice, or whether it's produced by a teenager or a middle-aged person - but merely that its users are active and spending as much time as possible on the site. In the parlance of journalism, the SA site has no "news hole" to fill; it does not have to consider what stories, from the point of view of the SA site creators, are going to bring readers, but rather must make it so that users can easily use the site, and that there is a enough response in terms of the ability of their algorithm to maintain a constant turnover of links. This ultimately allows for a vastly larger scope of acceptable debate - consider the differences in coverage of the 9-11 conspiracy film *Loose Change* as representative of the differences of opinion available to the SA site; while the *NYT* must, as per editorial policy, reject the outlandish conclusions of the film in favor of the official reports of the 9-11 Commission and the U.S. government, the SA allows not only direct links to online versions of the film, but the opinions, informed and ignorant alike, of various supporters and opponents of the film regardless of whether or not these have any credibility or authority whatsoever in official terms.

In Benjamin's terms, then, what we have here is the transition from the craftsman of the work of art before the invention of mechanical reproduction - the news story loses

its aura, its context within the bounds of a journalistic format³⁰. Here again we find the informational cycle repeating through not individuals but individual media sources. Just as a single aspect of an individual might make up the physiognomy of a *feullitonist*, so a single story, abstracted from its original context contributes to the community context - and therefore, the profitability - of the SA site.

The second aspect mentioned above, of allowing “parallel” comparisons immediately on breaking news, as opposed to the traditional “linear” comparisons of traditional media, would, on its own, also represent a novel development in analyzing information. In traditional media, the nearest analogue for parallel presentations of different coverage of topics occurs whenever a newspaper has “Pro/Con” debates on its editorial page; because of the limitations of the format, there are a number of subsequent limitations on the value of this comparison - namely, that at best there can only be a handful of differing opinions, due to the newsprint space available to any given debate, and that these must necessarily furthermore occur only whenever there has been enough public interest to warrant a comparison. A comparison across opinions must be a conscious decision on the part of an editor, whereas on the SA, this occurs as a simple matter of interest by the community, which can occur far quicker than the “next-day” speed of a newspaper. After this form of parallel disagreement, virtually all other forms of debate in traditional media occurs “linearly”, which in this case can be illustrated by shows such as *Crossfire* or *The McLaughlin Group* or Chris Matthews’ *Hardball*, where differing opinions are, by the necessity of the form, presented one after the other. This linear aspect means that opinions are sequentialized, and the oftentimes stark contrasts between opinions must be compared by holding one in mind while simultaneously trying

³⁰ Included in this are fictional and entertainment pieces; just as a news story is removed from the context and authoritative aura of a newspaper, so are pieces of entertainment removed from the context of, say the surrounding movie (in the case of a clip of a single scene), a review from the oeuvre of a critic, a game from the company which produced that game, or a comment from a discussion thread.

to comprehend the differences in assumption and conclusion made by the next person. Furthermore, while in linear debate, the “palimpsest” of one opinion laid out over the other is usually heard, the SA turns this difference into a visual and static comparison, allowing, if the user is so inclined, the possibility of considering the differences as they’re presented, rather than as they occur.

Finally, the SA is a much closer analogue to the processes of “democracy” than that of traditional media, since traditional media all hold at least two distinct structures which separate them from “pure” democratic debate - the structure of editorialship and the one-way flow of information from media source to consumer. In traditional media, the interests of the reader/viewership must be inferred through indirect means; for instance, the common response to the common complaint that traditional media obsess over celebrity and superficiality over “substantive” figures and issues is that the media are simply “giving the people what they want,” as reflected in ratings and sales. Neither of these means is directly related to what a given individual wants, and necessarily prevents any individual from having their informational needs and wants fully satisfied. The SA however, by whatever means it structures itself, has some form of direct community involvement; while this still presents the problem of being presented with exactly the information a given individual wants, the information presented is the direct result of a democratic process, not the inferences and abstractions of an editor as to what the reader/viewership wants. Furthermore, the opinions of an individual can be directly tagged to the story at hand in two ways; the individual can comment on SA itself, right beneath the link, or they can go through to the link and can usually comment on the original story itself, meaning that the individual has potentially far more influence on the story as it is read than in the previous forms of media, where such responses were limited to “letters to

the editor”, abstracted from the context of the original story, oftentimes days later, and selected by an editor out of a potentially large number of other comments.

As such, it can be seen that the ability of SA sites to dynamically present information from across media creates a new, valuable form of presenting information distinct in structural ways from all previous media. It must be said, however, that in discussing this "burst" aspect, that there exist strong differences between *Digg* and *reddit* in terms of editorship - namely that *Digg* institutes an editorial policy regarding "NSFW" (Not Safe For Work - generally nude, gory, or otherwise inappropriate links for public computer usage) and other potentially criminal or otherwise liable submissions, as well as, as some users claim, merely controversial material, while *reddit* merely requires labeling of links as NSFW, and removes copyrighted material only at the behest of the copyright holder. This creates interesting divides between the two sites; as per its oversight editorial policy, *Digg* therefore has a far lower percentage of political and technical links, while *reddit*, because of its lax, more libertarian policy, is often far more political, with a very broad spectrum in represented opinions and materials, and is far more technically oriented, with links discussing such technical arcana as the relative merits between various iterations of the C programming language, digital copyright, net neutrality, compiler techniques, and academic programming philosophy and pedagogy³¹. It can then be said that there is a certain kind of "check" on this "burst" of consciousness, a set of inhibitions which prevent, in the case of *Digg*, anything but the most overwhelming support for what might otherwise be suppressed information, such as occurred regarding what is known as the "DVD Hexadecimal" story³². The story, in brief, was that a hacker managed

³¹ For example, a random day's sampling of the main pages turns up, out of the first twenty five links, fifteen concern politics on *reddit*, while only four concern politics on *Digg*; while this is far from scientific, any other observers may find some topics more or less political than the author, the huge discrepancy between the sites is quite typical and noticeable over long periods of time.

³² More information available at <http://www.techcrunch.com/2007/05/01/digg-surrenders-to-mob/>

to reveal the hexadecimal code which kept HD-DVD files from playing on Linux computers; this code was then claimed to be the proprietary information of the HD-DVD standards licensing committee, which caused *Digg* to remove the reference to it from its page. Very rapidly, the users resubmitted the code, usually by actually posting it into the description of the link. The consequence of this was to move Kevin Rose, the founder of *Digg*, to accept that his users wanted the site to accept the potential threat of legal action in order to make the information widely available. In its dependence on its user-base, the SA site cannot simply extricate itself from the the cycle of information; even if it threatens to destroy the SA site itself, the SA site must first of all maintain the loyalty of its community, or else it might as well not exist.

SA sites are structurally dependent on the input of their users. A submitted link gets commented on, evaluated, and placed in a visual index with an actual, if unprecise, estimate of its interest to complete strangers through such counters as “diggs” on *Digg*, or story points in *reddit*. In these secondary activities, a huge amount of information is generated; granted, much of it is famously nothing more than pure trolling or nonsense - even randomly generated material from spamming activities - but there is enough to form intricately specific and valuable information, from the structures of software³³, to the economics of European patent enforcement³⁴, to the differences in resolution of HDTV on standard definition and high definition DVDs³⁵. As a consequence of the low cost of access, the rapid turnover of items, and the user-to-community forming techniques of comment-boards, channels, internal messaging, and direct communication and dialogue

³³ E.g., Comment Log for “Adobe Flash runtime to extend to C, C++, Java, Python, Ruby.” Available at <http://reddit.com/t/programming/info/6a2x1/comments/>

³⁴ E.g., Comment Log for “EU hits Microsoft with record 899 million euro antitrust fine.” Available at <http://reddit.com/info/6a4zq/comments/>

³⁵ E.g., Comment Log for “An ordinary DVD played on a modern HDTV is not only a huge improvement over the picture on a standard TV, but practically indistinguishable from that produced by a Blu-ray or HD DVD disc.” Available at <http://reddit.com/info/67fhi/comments/>

between founders of sites and their most vocal and active users - and as a direct result of the direct financial dependency the founders have on those who do submit large numbers of highly-engaging links - the SA site does have a unique combination of structural dependencies on cultural events and communitarian instincts from older forms of communication. Yet, for all that is novel, what remains the same is the capitalist cycle of information work in the process of identity formation through consumption.

The Ghost of Digital Knowing: Phantasmagoria and the Social Aggregator

Having considered the technical aspects of the SA site, it is now important to turn what roles SA sites play in the “phantasmagoric economy”³⁶ of the internet. Currently, the vast majority of links are from individuals who either have “amateur” interests - politics, software development - or have directly personal reasons for submission, such as hosting a blog or advertising a company; there are no “professional” SA submitters in the sense that there are “professional” journalists, though it looks like this could indeed become professionalized in the near future. Rather, the professionals on these sites are external - *reddit* does not contract for its own content as, for example, the *New York Times* does in employing its own journalists, but rather, external companies contract for individual “redditors” (sometimes representing companies that exist for these purposes) to submit and boost their content. For example, in a recent confrontation with some of its largest-submitting users, *Digg* confronted accusations that it was dependent on their content, responding that there were millions of other individuals who submitted stories

³⁶ The usage of “phantasmagoric economy” is drawn from Susan Buck-Morss’ discussion of Benjamin’s usage in “The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. “It [phantasmagoria] describes an appearance of reality that tricks the senses through technical manipulation. ... Phantasmagorias are a technoaesthetics. The perceptions they provide are “real” enough - their impact upon the senses and nerves is still “natural” from a neurophysical point of view. But their social function is in each case compensatory.” And: “Benjamin describes the flaneur as self-trained in this capacity of distancing oneself by turning reality into a phantasmagoria; rather than being caught up in the crowd, he slows his pace and observes it, making a pattern out of its surface. He sees the crowd as a reflection of his dream mood, an ‘intoxication’ for his senses.” Buck-Morss, Susan. “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *October* 62 (1992), pgs 22 and 24.

with less frequency, but totaled to a larger percentage of total submissions³⁷. While this does not indicate that these heavy users of the site are indeed a necessity for the site, it does indicate a recognition by the creators of *Digg* for whom they must consider as their best "customers"; and the numbers of stories that a given user can produce for a site is indeed impressive - a *reddit* user named "qgyh2" has "karma"³⁸ as of 2/24/08 over 119013, with the top ten users together having earned well over a half-million "karma" points. This development - amateurs paving the ground for later commercial uses is historically quite common; Benjamin notes that "The important contribution of amateurs can be observed in the early days of lithography, exactly as it can later in photography."³⁹ Similar to this is the *flaneur*, who was not a professional model, but merely a man of leisure displaying himself and examining others in the arcade. One furthermore thinks of the importance of the Palo Alto Computer Club, where the founders of Apple Computers met, or *Yahoo!*'s beginnings as a personal hobby of listing all the sites on the internet. More interestingly, if what separates an amateur from a professional is payment, this point ranking system is where the abstract community of users begins to develop an abstract method of exchange; in practice, karma is, while not quite legal tender, something similar to it nonetheless. It denotes status and labor, and allows the holder certain privileges: "Our editorial karma works a bit differently. It is a way for you to be ranked among your peers in order to reap the bragging rights associated with such status, and erect an online monument to your limitless capacities for procrastination and slack."⁴⁰

³⁷ See Schiffman, Betsy. *Wired Magazine*, "Near-Revolt on Digg Underscores Site's Dependence on Its Users". Posted 1/24/08. Available at http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2008/01/digg_revolt

³⁸ "Karma" is the system by which *reddit* rewards its most popular and frequent submitters of links. As *reddit* puts it in its "Help" section: "The formula for karma is constantly evolving (or, being intelligently redesigned, if you'd prefer). Presently, the easiest (and most effective) way to gain karma is by making good submissions: items that other people want to read and will subsequently become popular. Those redditors who best understand what people want to be reading about will be the best rewarded." Accessed 3/01/08, available at <http://reddit.com/help/karma>

³⁹ Benjamin, pg. 786

⁴⁰ Anonymous. "Karma", under "Help", *reddit.com*. Accessed 3/01/08, available at <http://reddit.com/help/karma>

Also: “In the post-Singularity pure information economy, karma will be used to upgrade your consciousness and existence in the hive mind. Good hunting!”⁴¹ While this is half-humorous, it is a perfect expression of the latent unconscious promise that the explosion of information creates, of which Benjamin was the first to uncover. Even more so, it represents the proletarianization of information amateurs for the purposes of extracting advertising value from their labor.

Benjamin considered how it was that such pastime observations became objects of consumption themselves:

“Basic to *flanerie*, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor. The *flaneur*, as is well known, makes ‘studies.’” On this subject, the nineteenth century Larousse has the following to say: ‘His eyes open, his ear ready, searching for something entirely different from what the crowd gathers to see. A word dropped by chance will reveal to him one of those character traits that cannot be invented and must be drawn directly from life....’”⁴²

Here, the “phantasmagoria of types” (as Benjamin terms it in his introduction to the “Expose of 1939”) becomes valuable in that they reveal to the *flaneur* what was inconceivable as pure deduction, which is then processed through the creative work of the artist or writer, made permanent in information work through publication, and assimilated back into the marketplace as the possibility of a pose, presentation, or

⁴¹ *ibid.* This description refers to the social movement of transhumanism, particularly the techno-teleological version espoused by inventor Ray Kurzweil, who coined this particular usage of the term “Singularity” in his book *The Singularity Is Near*. There he defines it as: “[the] destiny we have come to refer to as the Singularity.” (Kurzweil, 5) And: “The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. We will gain power over our fates. ... The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots. (Kurzweil, 9) ... In the aftermath of the Singularity, intelligence, derived from its biological origins in human brains and its technological origins in human ingenuity, will begin to saturate the matter and energy in its midst. It will achieve this by reorganizing matter and energy to provide an optimal level of computation ... to spread out from its origins on Earth.” (Kurzweil, 21) While Kurzweil disclaims that the Singularity is “neither utopian nor dystopian” (Kurzweil, 7), a certain eschatological theme may be inferred from these quotes, which is further confirmed by the rest of his writings, in *The Singularity is Near* and elsewhere. Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity is Near*. Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2005

⁴² Benjamin, 453

promotion. The individual begins to know their “type”; the bustling merchant, the keeper of a *pension*, or a housewife doing the shopping all have their individual “signs” read back to them through this cycle, and begin to know what will signal either prosperity or penury to the strangers in the street. The accidental image from reality is returned to reality as a communication of position. The subsequent step from this reified observation is the reaction against it by the workings of fashion; as such, what was as first unconscious is captured, made consciously available to the consumer, and then rejected by those who continue to seek what is “natural” in the crowd. That is why Larousse’s flaneur cannot go to the gallery to observe portrayals of humanity (as, say, Jacques-Louis David did in looking at Roman statuary for inspiration for the postures of the delegates in *The Oath of the Tennis Court*) but must instead look at others observing paintings in the gallery. Or, to put it another way, because one wants to display one’s position and prosperity, as proof of one’s bourgeois virtue, one cannot just have a single dress, but must show that one can obtain the latest novelties and fads; the *flaneur* must stay ahead of what the *feuilletonist* discovers in the *flaneur*, or else risk failing to catch the eye of other *flaneurs*, as in Larousse’s example above.

This search for novelty, for Benjamin, stems from the fact that in the 19th Century, there for the first time existed mechanized means of artificial reproduction of increasingly specific moments; while the woodprint, for example, allowed an image to be reproduced several hundred times, it remained a time-consuming and difficult process when compared to the development of lithography in the 19th Century. Furthermore, the woodprint lacked the cultures of precision and novelty that drove the lithographer; Elizabeth Eisenstein points out that in early illustrations in the first printed books, very often a single image would be reused for towns and authors, so that a book might list

dozens of authors - each with the identical woodcut picture!⁴³ Benjamin of course noted this transition and its effects in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”; but to move this further, even the best technique requires certain notions to move it past simplicity. It is in no way evident that the printer who chose to repeat the same cut again and again was stupid, foolish, or cheap; given that such repetitions occurred so regularly in the first printed books, they imply rather that reproduction takes time to develop its own codes of excellence even when that reproductive capability is appended to previously existing forms. Those repeated woodcuts are fine examples of carving; they are not, however, fine examples of representing the objects they claimed to represent, and rather served more as allegories of the cities than as pictures of any actual city.

It might be taken that this repetition of forms occurs in developing media - it occurred in the novel fear of the bourgeois subject in “owning what someone else has,” as noticed in Balzac’s examination of the collector Cousin Pons, and it occurs today in the insults which come from submitting an already submitted story. The fact that the *magazines de nouveaute* which inhabited the arcades had so much readily comparable merchandise on sale fueled an explosion in the need for difference, which revealed itself in linear terms - one could have linin, muslin, creoline, etc. from different stores in different patterns - and chronological terms - one must have the latest cut. Both of these differences grew in frequency and depth. Yet, corresponding to this desire for difference grew the unconscious loathing for the tensions it created, which led to the decline of flanerie as a commercial species of the arcade. “The sandwichman is the last incarnation of

⁴³ “An Ulm edition [of *The Nuremberg Chronicle*] of 1483 ‘has one cut which is used thirty-seven times and altogether nineteen blocks do duty for one hundred and thirty-four illustrations.’ “ Bland *A History of Book Illustrations*, quoted in Eisenstein, Elizabeth. *The Printing Press as Agent of Change*. Cambridge University Press, 2005, pg. 85

the flaneur.”⁴⁴ To Benjamin, this descent derived from the decline of the arcades. The individuals who advertised the fashions in the *magazines de nouveaute* in their height went from being self-indulgent consumer-flaneurs to individuals who were dehumanized to the point of mere visual information. The same content regarding clothing and such came from both; but in the former case, it was on display in its natural context of a self-defining bourgeois, while in the latter it was in the form of an exploited urban sub-proletariat, whose only receipt of the value of the information he displayed came in subsistence wages. From this conflict in the bourgeois individual, between being a symbol of a distinctive class rather than a mere consumer - between being a flashy *flaneur* and the latent understanding that it was all merely clothing that never really separated one from the same humanity as the sandwichboardman - came novelty.

From this angle, the attraction of *reddit*'s karma becomes more apparent; through “procrastination and slack,” the user discovers what is novel, which, given how easy searching is on the internet, is no mean feat. The user then displays that novelty, and has the social reward of discovering that they, in fact, are themselves novel, and are distinct from all the other readers of the SA site - they're the ones that know where, in all the vast amounts of repeated and similar information, something which provides a fresh perspective valuable to large numbers of strangers can be found. Yet this “positive” aspect, of the lone fellow finding great links is mirrored by a “negative” aspect of commercial interests using the same cycle to promote their own interests. Rather than simply being a testament to procrastination and slack, *reddit*'s karma becomes the notches in the belt of a successful marketer.

The Cycle of Information and the Fear of Commerce

This dual relationship was noted by Benjamin in the relation of the *flaneur* to the

⁴⁴ Benjamin, 451

sandwichboard advertising. The degradation of the sandwichman bears a strong resemblance to the contemporary continual hunt for spammers, link-jackers, and the self-interested. The SA site exists because of advertising; since it produces only a minimal service (its algorithm), all of the SA site's revenues stem from advertising (pace *MetaFilter*.) Thus, the constant fear of contamination from that advertising. The greatest fear is that of spamming; every website that requires registration now also includes what is known as a "captcha"⁴⁵, a small distorted image that only a human can currently discern as letters and re-type as proof of one's humanity. Leaving aside the fascinating potential connections between the lumpenproletarian and the spam-bot, this fear of being inundated with spammers currently is kept at bay by the virtual gate of the captcha; a much more debated topic is the role of link-jacking and self-promotion. Link-jacking is basically the practice of taking potentially interesting information or media, copying it to one's own site, and then using it as a means of expropriating the resulting webtraffic to boost one's own site - and therefore advertising revenue. Against this hatred of the link-jacker is the fact that several well-known and otherwise respected and content-producing sites regularly use it:

"Keep in mind — linkjacking isn't always a bad thing, in my opinion. Many smaller sites get a ton of publicity by being linkjacked by more established sites. In tech, Engadget, **Gizmodo**, **TechCruch**, and **Mashable** are some of the ones that practice it. They send a good amount of traffic to the smaller sites that they linkjack, but they also keep a ton more themselves."⁴⁶

While on *reddit*, linkjacking is debated, and avoiding the practice is considered something worth advertising; searching the term reveals that the overwhelming usage of it is to proclaim original material.⁴⁷ As such, there is no set rule or banning for using such a

⁴⁵ "Completely Automated Turing Test To Tell Computers and Humans Apart" More available at <http://www.captcha.net/>

⁴⁶ Rucker, J.D. *Sociable Media Blog*, "Linkjacking is Good, Bad, and Ugly" posted on 2/18/08. Available at <http://soshable.com/linkjacking/#more-20>

⁴⁷ As of 2/24/08, there are 200 links returned. Available at <http://reddit.com/search?q=linkjacking>

technique, it represents the difficulty between determining what is “original” in observation, and what is merely transmitting what is already out there, and therefore profiting off of the mere existence of others. Benjamin notes:

“The social base of flanerie is journalism. As flaneur, the literary man ventures into the marketplace to sell himself. Just so - but that by no means exhausts the social side of flanerie. ‘We know,’ says Marx, ‘that the value of each commodity is determined by the quantity of labor materialized in its use value, by the working-time socially necessary for its production. (Marx, *Das Kapital*, ed. Korsch [Berlin, 1932], p. 188) The journalist, as flaneur, behaves as if he too were aware of this.”

Here is the information cycle laid bare; journalism, the productive side of sight, supports the side which insists on being seen. Benjamin continues:

“The number of work hours socially necessary for the production of his particular working energy is, in fact, relatively high; insofar as he makes it his business to let his hours of leisure on the boulevard appear as part of this work time, he multiplies the latter and thereby the value of his own labor. In his eyes, and often also in the eyes of his bosses, such value has something fantastic about it. Naturally, this would not be the case if he were not in the privileged position of making the work time necessary for the production of his use value available to a general and public review by passing that time on the boulevard and thus, as it were, exhibiting it.”⁴⁸

And:

“The press brings into play an overabundance of information, which can be all the more provocative the more it is exempt from any use. (Only the ubiquity of the reader would make possible a utilization; and so the illusion of such ubiquity is also generated.) The actual relation of this information to social existence is determined by the dependence of the information industry on financial interests and its alignment with these interests. As the information industry comes into its own, intellectual labor fastens parasitically on *every* material labor, just as capital more and more brings every material labor into a relation of dependency.”⁴⁹

In considering this with *reddit*'s explanation of “karma” - that “It is a way for you to be ranked among your peers in order to reap the bragging rights associated with such

⁴⁸ Benjamin, 446-447

⁴⁹ Benjamin, 447

status, and erect an online monument to *your limitless capacities for procrastination and slack.*” (Emphasis added) - the presumed connection between “mere” observation and the production of an information economy becomes more apparent. As opposed to artistic inspiration, the work of the flaneur (in journalistic mode) and the “redditor” (in submitter mode) does not strike at chance, but rather when the journalist/submitter engages not in production but in consumption and leisure, where the only perceived work of the journalist/submitter is in refining that leisure into “interesting” knowledge. This is not to say that in the journalist/submitter the line between work and play is blurred; it is to say that it does not exist at all in any meaningful sense, due to the fact that information, to the extent that it describes reality, is in as much dynamic flux as reality itself. The structure which creates the problem of linkjacking is revealed in the hierarchy of information, where the value of information is most valuable to the SA site, then to the link-jacker, then to the creator of the original information - then to the submitter, who ironically, through the time spent combing the web, has done the most work (in terms of the information economy) of all. As such, just as the difference between work and play dissolves in the journalist/submitter, so does the difference between the sandwichboardman and the submitter, insofar as the financial benefit of the information goes first to the SA site, then to the linkjacker, then to the creator - then only to the submitter in the form of “karma”, something valuable only to the extent that it serves to keep the submitter submitting, just as the economic value of the sandwichboardman was only enough to keep him alive.

Corresponding to this is the absolutely unpredictable nature of what becomes popular; this does not necessarily relate to the concepts of popular as mentioned above in terms of popular viewpoints, such as what is a popular conservative political thought, but rather what is popular in the expanse of all digital media which become available on

the site; *every* digital labor is presentable to the SA site and is made an object of democracy, which votes on such media regardless of stark differences between the form and how absurd such a comparison might seem in previous media. A java video game can be above a list of reasons for assuming that 9-11 was an inside job, which is above the link to a series of capchas for a much-reviled organization (thereby allowing hackers to overwhelm that site's capacities), which is above a video of a cat licking a dog. It is, perhaps, the actual materialization of the cliches of "voting with one's feet," or "voting with one's dollars." It further serves to note that this overabundance of information has the exact opposite effect of what overabundance might mean in another context, such a dozen people talking at once - rather than exhausting the individual, the individual is drawn further in. The illusion of the ubiquitous reader is shared by both the structure of the site, and the reader themselves; presumably, everything on the next page is of enough interest to let one at least look at the links, since there is no structural difference between what occupies the first page, or the second, save that some items are on their way up, other down, and other peaking. The ubiquity of the reader - in terms of the fact that each story must be voted on - and in not reading, the reader still has made a choice - and therefore, to some extent, read by an "unconscious" in the form of the collective readership, brings about an *actual* utilization, of which Benjamin could only propose as an imaginary utilization. "The flaneur is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuation. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers."⁵⁰ And:

"One must make an effort to grasp the altogether fascinating moral constitution of the passionate flaneur. The police - who here, as on so many of the subjects we are treating, appear as experts - provide the following indication in the report of a Paris secret agent from October 1798 [original source unknown]: 'It is almost impossible to summon and maintain good moral character in a thickly massed

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 427

population where each individual, unbeknownst to all the others, hides in the crowd, so to speak, and blushes before the eyes of no one.’ (Cited in Adolf Schmidt, *Pariser Zustände während der Revolution*, vol. 3 (Jena, 1876). The case in which the flaneur completely distances himself from the type of the philosophical promenader, and takes on the features of the werewolf restlessly roaming a social wilderness, was fixed for the first time and forever afterward by Poe in his story ‘The Man of the Crowd’.”⁵¹

Here we see the question of anonymity made not merely contemporary, but perennial to the root dilemma of urbanity; how can it be that, coping with the massive increase of information produced by innumerable people, the anonymity and mystery of their individual situations be overcome to forge out of that crowd a viable, sustainable community? The modern answer begins with the formation of mass media, which takes what is valuable from the individual observer, and returns it to the crowd as phantasmagoric image, which then proceeds through the crowd - via means particular the time and place of that crowd - only to return to the individual again, who herself is overwhelmed by the activity of the mass and believes its actions somehow more “real” than the classical poses. The SA site, though novel in many ways, ultimately serves only as the particular form of a particular place of the contemporary crowd - the internet.

⁵¹ Benjamin, 417-418

CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL NETWORKING AND THE MAN IN THE CROWD

The quality which unites all three of the SN sites discussed is that they first and foremost make social relationships transparent, and that they provide the means by which various media may be shared across those relationships.⁵² The combination of these two elements is what separates these SN from similarly structured websites - the personal photograph website Flickr, the video website YouTube, and the vast majority of blogs - in that while these latter three websites have social networking elements, such as subscriptions to various other producers, their main purposes center around a single medium. The purpose of the SN, as opposed to the public media website, is not to limit its users in choice of communications media, but rather to make a broad array of media available through their websites, and limiting the access to that media through the individual users, creating two parallel worlds for the access of media. One may choose to discover people through a given medium - the public media website - or one may choose to discover media through a given network of people - the Social Networking website.

The consequence of this separation is perhaps best understood in the separation of "profession" and "personality"; in a profession, the subject generally takes on a series of well-defined and enumerable tasks which may be examined and understood in a short period of time by the outside observer. For example, just as the description of the profession of "garbageperson" is generally understood to refer to a person taking away garbage, and not, say, writing legal briefs or performing colonoscopies, a person using *YouTube* would generally understand that they are going only to be watching various

⁵² This is a reduction of the definition given by danah boyd [sic] and Nicole Ellison in the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication: "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site." boyd and Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship" *JCMC* 13 (2007), available at <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>

videos, and not, say, reading essays or playing video games. As opposed to this, "personality" usually is understood to refer to an individual's social and/or personal characteristics which are constantly in flux, depending on an interaction between internal qualities and beliefs and external circumstance, and which are not enumerable, or immediately comprehensible to the outside observer. To this end, it is difficult to say what the ideal *MySpace* page is, just as it is difficult to say what the ideal personality is; individual *MySpace* pages drastically differ from individual to individual, and can drastically change over time. Furthermore, the increasing amounts of media and applications available to the SN user means that the actual purposes of a SN are constantly growing in both number and specificity; for example, in a recent address, *Facebook* founder Mark Zuckerberg spoke to over 800 individual developers of *Facebook* applications, and as of 1/17/08, *Facebook* lists a total of 13,840 applications that a user may add to their *Facebook* page, a number which implies a practically infinite number of combinations of applications.⁵³ As such, the SN site allows not merely for the placement of an individual inside a given network of relationships, but furthermore, through the multiple media, allows for the individual to create a perfectly unique combination of videos, songs, pictures, page designs, and applications, to the degree that the individual, depending on how much time and effort they wish to spend on a given SN site, can create a digital extension of themselves into the internet which parallels the development of their material personality through such means as fashion, hobbies, possessions, etc. Yet, as will be discussed below, this "internet persona" contains within it both limitations and extensions of the self which drastically change the qualities of the individual's capacities and understandings of itself and others, and which parallels Benjamin's elaboration of the

⁵³ Calculating the number of combinations of applications can be done by taking the factorial of the number of applications; here, 13840!. However, calculating such a number on a regular computer or calculator gives an error message, the result is so large; for comparison's sake, 10! equals 6,566,400, while 40! equals over 8×10^{47} .

development of the bourgeois self through fashion, consumption, and architecture in the *Passagenwerk*, particularly in relationship to Benjamin's examination of the collector.

Social Notification and the Timing of Knowledge

One of the most debated aspects of SN sites is the question of social notification. Examples of this kind of notification include birthday reminders, status updates, recently accepted friendships, romantic relationship updates, software installation updates, gift receipts, discovered aesthetic tastes, various quizzes taken, changes in employer, and recent blog updates - among innumerable others. This constant barrage of options to update one's social status correspondingly produces massive amounts of pre-tagged information. The consequence of this is that radically large amounts of chronological data, observations, and activities gets recorded, but is not normally available to the user through the interface of the website; for every single user update, time, location, and indexing data is retaken, so that what is to the user is a single sentence of two dozen letters is to the website often several times that.

This record of activity is generally used by the website for marketing purposes; the main revenue streams for *MySpace* and *Facebook* consist of providing advertising and marketing information to third parties; essentially, the SN website serves as something analogous to a television station in this respect, whereby the site attempts to keep people looking at advertisements just up to the point where they will want to do something else. However, this is not to say that this recording is "expropriated" information; any user can record every change to their pages, or their friends pages - it is simply not the default for an individual's page on these sites, nor is it necessarily even an option given through the site itself to the user, but has to be done through other means, such as third-party software. The implication of this is then that the respective companies begin to acquire

tremendous amounts of data about not merely a given user, but about the trends of vast numbers of users, searchable through any given tagged term.

It serves here to consider, in the light of the vast amounts of information instantly taken about the online userbase of a website, how much of Benjamin's life was absorbed in the collection of data in the *Passagenwerk*, and to consider his purposes in light of his larger project to reveal "dialectics at a standstill." Without going into unnecessary detail, the work occupied, off-and-on, approximately a decade of Benjamin's life, and he left it only in his fateful flight from the fall of Paris in 1940. In attempting to find sponsors for the work, he wrote two draft prospectuses in 1935 and 1939, which explain in various terms what techniques he used and what results he produced.

"Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated - which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history - that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society - as stored in the unconscious of the collective - engender through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions."⁵⁴

And, more succinctly:

"The subject of this book is an illusion expressed by Schopenhauer in the following formula: to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper."⁵⁵

The general technique Benjamin uses throughout his *Passagenwerk* is an early

⁵⁴ Benjamin, pg. 4

⁵⁵ Ibid, 14.

form of tagging; he collected references from across the century and across media concerning certain specific terms, materials, and persons, such as "Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandeville", "Literary History, Hugo", "Idleness", and "Boredom, Eternal Return". By examining similar phenomena as they recurred over time, Benjamin attempted to draw the unconscious, or embedded, and therefore unspoken, beliefs of 19th Century Paris out into the open, where they could then be put to critical - and for Benjamin, therefore revolutionary - ends.

The data collected forms in a certain sense, a strong parallel to the methods of Benjamin, if put to commercial, rather than communist, purposes; the massive collections of individual preferences and statements are tagged, sorted, and then made to explain the unconscious lives of their users. But there is also a new element stemming from the vast amount of this data, in that not merely is subjective, aesthetic, or simply communicative information being catalogued, but huge amounts of purely factual data, of the sort generally useful to social scientists, epidemiologists, economists, and sociologists. In other words, social networking potentially automatically anthropologizes its users, producing a study (for lack of a better term) of an individual, of sorts, which goes under various names in various websites, but is generally something along the lines of a marketing profile. The classic example of the types of information which fuel this study are those which go into *Amazon.com*'s "Recommendations" page. What is collected about the shopping habits of a given user allows the statistical algorithms of *Amazon.com* to both calculate similar objects to what the user has already bought, and to furthermore calculate, from that individual user, likely objects other buyers might want. Essentially, these mining algorithms can produce dynamic analyses of potential, amorphous categories which often lack identifiers outside the calculations of the data mining computer. For

example, a user might purchase a blender, a set of books by Charles Dickens, and a remote control; while one might not see any connection between the three objects in the case of one user, the mining algorithm notes the connection between the items, using massively large databases of purchases. The algorithm, knowing nothing of user or of other products but their respective tags, and then only to the degree those tags "naturally" correspond (i.e., if a "hard drive" gets tagged "computer drive", then there's no guarantee that the computer will recognize them as the same object) then takes what amounts to the best possible calculation of commonalities among the tags, producing a new social category in a manner analogous to the early sociological analyses of the *feullitonists* noting that young women are wearing more crinoline this season, for no more reason than that they wore more linen last season. Analysis of productive or ontological social associations are no more important than empirical observed social associations, which form the basis of Benjamin's insight into the workings of French culture at the time of the Arcades, and which repeats itself now in the developing digital era.

Leaving aside the conspiracist claims of some critics of SN sites⁵⁶, it remains to be seen how the previously mentioned collected quantity of data operates outside of fields where either direct consumption of services, or the impetus to consumption through advertising occurs. While such observational power is generally linked back to The

⁵⁶ Typical of this vein of criticism is Tom Hodgkinson of the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*: "The creators of the site need do very little but fiddle with the programme. In the main, they simply sit back and watch as millions of Facebook addicts voluntarily upload their ID details, photographs and lists of their favourite consumer objects. Once in receipt of this vast database of human beings, Facebook then simply has to sell the information back to advertisers, or, as Zuckerberg puts it in a recent blog post, 'to try to help people share information with their friends about things they do on the web'." Hodgkinson, Tom. "With friends like these ..." *The Guardian*, 1/14/08. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/jan/14/facebook?>

Panopticon⁵⁷, a better, and more insightful analogy is with the U.S. Army's "Operation Igloo White"⁵⁸. In short, "Igloo White" was a high-tech tracking operation to discover where the North Vietnamese Army was crossing the Demilitarized Zone in support of the Viet Cong; consisting of a wide variety of electronic listening and tracking devices, the system fed input to a central tracking station in Thailand, where, superimposed on a map of Vietnam, white squiggles noted where the sensors picked something up. It was not long before the N.V.A., realizing what the bizarre electronic devices hanging from trees meant, and began turning the advanced surveillance of "Igloo White" against the U.S. Army, sending large animals like elephants to traverse an area, thereby overwhelming the sensors and leading the military analysts to believe that they were tracking a large logistics convoy, while the real convoys proceeded stealthily along other means while appearing - so the U.S. Army thought - as nothing more than animal tracks far away. With the abstracted, temporal information of social networking sites increasingly being produced by ever savvier users, the "paranoia" claim is less and less realistic - as is the trend-exposing expectation of the commercial watchers hoping to determine "the next big thing."

Social Networking and Permanent Professionalization

In one sense however, such an advantage to data mining over traditional forms is necessary, as it provides two crucial elements for whatever beneficial elements the SN site possesses, the element of a source of "productive" rhetoric and the element of anesthesia

⁵⁷ For example, Harvard professor Viktor Mayer-Schönberger of the John F. Kennedy school of government has used this Panopticon analogy to argue that computers should have some kind of automatic "forget" setting: "It's a "modest" proposal, according to Mayer-Schönberger, but he recognizes that others may see it as "simplistic" or "radical." To those who feel like they are living in a panopticon, it might feel more like a chink in the wall through which fresh air blows." Anderson, Nate. "Escaping the data panopticon: Prof says computers must learn to "forget"", *arstechnica.com*. Available at <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20070509-escaping-the-data-panopticon-teaching-computers-to-forget.html>

⁵⁸ For more information, see Correll, John. "Igloo White" *Air Force Magazine*. Vol. 87, No. 11 (Nov. 2004). Available at <http://www.afa.org/magazine/Nov2004/1104igloo.asp> Also, Halter, Ed. "Toy Soldiers" *From Sun-Tzu to X-Box: War and Video Games*. PublicAffairs Press, 2006

for the "trauma"⁵⁹ necessary to learn to navigate digital and interactive spaces. The relationship between the two is dialectical; as the ability to focus in on heretofore undiscovered patterns of common consumption among populations increases, so does the ability and desire for ever more sophisticated forms of interactivity, mediation, and temporality. This dialectic is seen in the very evolution of SN sites; the development of the capacities of the internet to share various media leading to the success of a more sophisticated subsequent SN site is reflected in the chronology of the development of the three SN sites under examination; the first available was *LiveJournal*, then *MySpace*, then *Facebook*, paralleling respectively the development first of text, then of "passive" media (photographs, music, videos, etc.), then of interactivity (applets, applications, games, etc.)

To elaborate, when one first visits a given *LiveJournal*, one is met first and foremost by what essentially is a blog, with the addition of a place for the user to list their friends; only the user themselves is notified when their friends update their *LiveJournals*. For a fee, a user can upload the "passive" digital media, but this option came later in *LiveJournal's* existence, which is reflected in the fact that visitors encounter these passive media not in specialized locations on the page of the site, but rather simply embedded in the scroll of the text. Coming next to *MySpace*, the visitor encounters a page divided into several dedicated sections; dedicated locations for photographs of friends, a video, a music player, a list of personal information, a user picture, blog updates, and other small informational elements, such as quizzes, world news updates, and friend

⁵⁹ Here "trauma" is used not in its conventional sense of a lasting damage, but rather in a lighter sense of the pains and confusions which generally accompany learning how to manipulate technology - some of the cognitive issues around this are discussed below. With that said, it certainly remains the case that while the crippling damages of "real" trauma exceed those of learning, say, how to design a website in HTML, nonetheless many individuals are intimidated and made anxious by interacting with technology on a daily basis, and feel themselves incapable of more than the most basic actions, if even that, and fear "destroying the computer" with a single wrong click. And of course, though this isn't the main point of this thesis, there are cases where internet technology is abused, and a trauma inconceivable in other media occurs, such as in the Megan Meier case.

comments. While the areas are clearly delineated, and they can be manipulated and redesigned by the user, the form is generally locked by *MySpace*, and to attempt to re-create the scroll like interface of *LiveJournal* requires considerable familiarity with HTML, CSS, and the interface of *MySpace* itself. Again, like the user recording all their own information as well as the SN itself, the visual layout of a *MySpace* site is not generally impossible to drastically change, but is not easy or automatic either. Finally, *Facebook* locks down much of the layout of the site, ostensibly in order to allow the large number of applications to operate in a static hosting environment, leading to a minimum of programming conflicts.

The experiential aspects of using these SN spaces serves as a training element for later encounters with API's. The divided layout of *Facebook* is similar to a number of API's used everyday in the business, academic, and other professional worlds. Indeed, SN sites themselves, despite their prominence in the media, are merely a single and small element of the Web 2.0 development. For example, consider two screenshots from two personnel tracking API's: *PeopleSoft*, by the Oracle Corporation, and the Washington Post Corporation's *WPONET*. Both of these APIs serve the same function, and contain a large number of very similar pages; an employee can input time worked, personal information, register for health care, file a grievance; and employers can track all this information, and access other manager-restricted files (worked-hours approval, for example.) Among *Facebook*, *PeopleSoft*, and *WPONET*, the format is exactly the same; there is a colorful corporate tag across the top, a list of functions across the left, embedded in a CSS/HTML frame, and spaces for entering data directly in the middle. Compare these screenshots used for entering personal information between them:

Facebook

facebook Profile edit Friends Networks Inbox home account privacy logout

Basic Contact Relationships Personal Education Work Picture

Search +

Applications edit

- Photos
- Video
- Groups
- Events
- Marketplace
- + more

Email: mshagan@gmail.com Only my friends
Add / Remove Emails

IM Screen Name(s): Add another screen name Only my friends

Mobile Phone: Only my friends

Land Phone: Only my friends

Address: City: Zip: Only my friends

Website: Only my friends

Save Changes Cancel

Facebook © 2008 Advertisers Businesses Developers About Facebook Terms Privacy Help

The screenshot displays the PeopleSoft Self-Service interface. At the top left is the PeopleSoft logo. A navigation bar at the top right contains links for Home, Add to Favorites, and Sign Out. On the left side, a 'Menu' panel is visible, featuring a search box and a tree view with categories: My Favorites, Self Service, Time Reporting, Personal Information (expanded), Payroll and Compensation, and Benefits. The 'Personal Information' category is expanded to show sub-items: Home and Mailing Address, Phone Numbers, and Emergency Contacts. The main content area, titled 'Main Menu > Self-Service > Personal Information', includes a sub-header 'Review and update your personal information' and three interactive cards: 'Home and Mailing Address' (Review and update your home and mailing addresses), 'Phone Numbers' (Add or update phone numbers, or specify your primary phone number), and 'Emergency Contacts' (Add or update your emergency contact information).



EMPLOYEE CENTER >

SHARED SERVICES >

DEPARTMENTAL GROUPS >

Home > Employee Center > My Contact Information

White Pages

Contact Us

Log Out

- My Time
- My Health & Life Benefits >
- Retirement Benefits
- My 401(k) Savings Plan Benefits >
- My Contact Information**
- Forms >
- My Training
- My Travel
- My Pay Information >
- Employee Discounts
- Information Security
- Archer

Personal Information

[Redacted]

Name

SI [Redacted]

Addresses

Address Type	Status	As Of	Country	Address
Home	Current	09/03/2005	USA	[Redacted]

Change home address

Phone Numbers

Phone Type	Phone Number
Home	[Redacted]
Main	[Redacted]

Change phone numbers

Emergency Contacts

Name	Relationship to Employee	Primary Contact
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Change emergency contacts

The knowledge of how to navigate a digital space is both analogous to literacy, and, increasingly, as important of a skill. In considering the relationship between the cognitive differences in individuals from preliterate and literate societies, one must consider the cognitive requirements of navigating a digital space, which includes not just the "simple" cognitive skills of moving a cursor around the screen, but further understandings and mappings of a given space. In exploring a given SN, the new user is first encountered with a questionnaire and a series of site appearance choices, followed by visiting their own page from the user's point of view. What is not necessarily immediately obvious upon creating a new individual SN page is that there are essentially two separate user pages; the one where they are allowed a modicum of control over appearance (*LiveJournal, MySpace, Facebook*), available applications and media (*LiveJournal, MySpace, Facebook*), and/or can themselves use various applications (*Facebook*) - and the one which their friends see. For a new user, learning to navigate this divide between the user page and the visitor page becomes an engrossing task in-and-of itself, requiring that the user begin to internalize this separation of spaces, between the "inside" or the "brains" of the site and the "outside" or the face of the site. Furthermore, as the user becomes aware of the operations necessary to change the "face" of the site, so do they become aware of the very structures of the site; what the designers and supporters of the site have and have not allowed in terms of appearance, media, usage, and size. This is a necessary part of learning how to produce something for public consumption on the internet; blogs, professional projects, and wikis all have the same facet of their existence. What makes the SN site *primus inter pares*, is the fact that so many more individuals use SN sites than any other form of internet site or API which requires such an adjustment, and that SN sites are so prevalent particularly among the

young. *MySpace* comes before *WPONET*.

Because of their technical complexity and the secretive nature of proprietary software, this learning of what essentially is only the products of a computer code is rather cognized through various metaphors; it is embodied as "spaces", or analogized with texts, rather than what it most basically is, iterations of algorithms, as "pages", and "rooms", and "boards", rather than calculations and rules. The logic of this is again discernible in the chronology of the three sites; each site after the other has gone further in attempting to include more and more media, appealing first to abstract and passive forms of embodiment - writing and then visual and audio media (*LiveJournal*, *MySpace*) - then to interactive, communal, and immersive forms of embodiment as provided by *Facebook*. Furthermore, one considers the dual, and related clichés of the "n00b" and the "h4x0r", the person who has no familiarity with computers, and the person who is intensively and extensively familiar with computers. To the degree that an individual does not understand computers, they seem to operate without reason, in subsequent stages; first, the desktop appears haphazard, with files hidden in strange places⁶⁰; then, once the layout of the computer is learned, comes trying to operate a computer over long periods of time, when things shut down, disappear, crash, conflict, or simply do not work for seemingly random and inexplicable reasons. This process of learning, revision, and embodiment eventually leads to an individual who then understands not merely the logic behind a single file, piece of software, or computer, but the choices that designers make across a wide variety of computer technologies. It is important to note as well that as computers become not merely novelties to virtually every individual in at least the industrialized world - if we have not already crossed that point - knowing how to use a certain set of common

⁶⁰ Such first time user questions are the fodder of enormous rage and humor among the more savvy: "Why save music and files to the documents folder?" "Where does the text get copied to when I copy paste?" and the classic response to the old DOS command "Press Any Key," "Where's the Any key?"

computer functions of entering and parsing commands and responses across various settings will become first commonplace, then as much of a social disadvantage as illiteracy. The manipulation of these spaces - which in business and other professional settings can be sparse, complicated, and lengthy, is in SN sites made both easy and enjoyable through the friendly nature of the communications and updates, the entertainment value of the passive media, and the useful and pleasurable engagement of the applications. And as a final note towards understanding the initial difficulties to which the various SN sites subtly ameliorate, one can only speculate as to the physical/neurological issues involved in becoming a user; it is interesting to note that while the general usage of the internet is not *a priori* in contest with literacy, internet usage presumably requires a vastly different combination of cognitive skills which are quite different from those for traditional literacy. For example, while literacy and language skills are largely located in the left hemisphere of the brain, the other skills of digital navigation - spatial reasoning, auditory and visual processing, and some problem solving skills - are located largely in the right hemisphere. Cognitively, the results of these developments parallel observations in the development of logic that anthropologists have observed in preliterate societies. The Russian psychologist Luria, for example, noted that among preliterate individual, logic consisted of functional associations, while in literate individuals logic was able to include typological, abstract qualities in consideration. While to go further would be beyond the justification and scope of this examination, it is possible to speculate initial physical challenges which underlie learning to navigate digital spaces, which discourage many individuals outside of any innate complications in the tasks they attempt to complete on a computer, and which for many are best overcome through the attractions of socialization and entertainment.

While the temporal aspect of social notification reveals one manner in which a new tempo in social interactions is brought about by SN sites , another aspect concerns the previously mentioned ways in which the SN site allows users to tailor their communication across a wide spectrum of expressivity, speed, and publicity. It is by clear that by definition that a SN site must have some method of communication; it's inconceivable that anything termed social should go without a means of communication between members of the community. But less obvious is the fact that social networking inevitably leads to multiple routes of communication which the form has developed; *LiveJournal* has public comments and direct emails to the user; *MySpace* allows visitors to the site to leave public comments, email a message, display videos and sound files which could potentially serve as methods of communication between individuals, and finally has an instant messenger for members of the site. *Facebook* has all these methods, and innumerable more, as each application, through notification of installation as well as various widgets and status notifiers within the applications themselves. The inevitability stems from the "inside"/"outside" split of the SN user page, whereby some communications inevitably are meant only to go "inside" the site, while others become public statements. As the logic of Web 2.0 , as well as increasing availability of new accessories such as digital cameras, microphones, and animation software, to name a few, work on communication however, the number of applications and tags themselves take on an autonomy within themselves, notifying SN friends without the user themselves necessarily intending them to. It is even quite likely that some of these notifications will happen when the user would actively prefer them not to, such as, for a minor example, a notification that a user has, say, made a move in a game or messaged someone when they claimed to be somewhere else.

The Interior of the Internet Persona

In returning to this digital "footprint" of the internet persona, these routes of communication have at least two interesting elements; the first is how they create their own "etiquette" of sorts, and secondly, how they come to serve as form a "proprioception", whereby the individual realizes that, given their usage of a certain site, the facts that others must therefore know about them, which can range from the innocuous, such as knowing an individual has advanced another level in a game, to the downright harmful, such as being tagged as being drunk in a picture, which can and has led to legal consequences in certain situations.⁶¹

This development of a virtual proprioceptive sense occurs in the larger development of the internet persona, which furthermore develops under a certain kind of legal regime which bears examining further for implications about the manners in which the SN site impacts and engages their users. As to the question of what rights a user has to what they have produced of themselves on the site, the answer is only the content they themselves produce, and that only to the extent that it is movable elsewhere at the sufferance of the site; should *MySpace* delete a user's account, if they have saved their blog entries, messages, videos, etc. elsewhere, they may put them up elsewhere; otherwise everything about that user's account is deleted and irretrievable. This legal regime is spelled out in what is conventionally known as a End-User Licensing Agreement (EULA), which essentially serves as the Bill of Rights for an individual user; the rights

⁶¹ A recent British newspaper writes: "Last September, David Rice, Britain's second-ranked tennis junior, and Naomi Brady, national U-18 champion, had their funding pulled and coaching suspended after the Lawn Tennis Association found pictures of them drinking beer, partying and, in Ms Brady's case, posing at a nightclub with her legs wrapped around a vending machine. ... A survey released by Viadeo said that 62 per cent of British employers now check the Facebook, MySpace or Bebo pages of some applicants, and that a quarter had rejected candidates as a result. Reasons given by employers included concerns about 'excess alcohol abuse', ethics and job 'disrespect'." Randall and Richards, "Facebook can ruin your life. And so can MySpace, Bebo..." *The Independent*, 10/02/2008. Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/facebook-can-ruin-your-life-and-so-can-myspace-bebo-780521.html?service=Print>

however, are all on the side of the hosting company, with the user limited to privileges, as access is usually considered legally. (An exception to this is the nation of Estonia⁶², which has made online rights equivalent to human rights, providing an interesting contrast to the access regime of the rest of the world.) As such, it is theoretically possible for an individual to be banned from being able to access the internet; in the absence of public mandates for access, and a genuinely public equivalent of a SN site, such a ban may be practically impossible, given the private nature of most internet services and SN sites, it is however legally possible. The continuing attraction then is that SN sites have a financial incentive, ostensibly, to provide as many resources, as regularly, to as many users as possible. This technolibertarian reality, where the free market provides access in the interest of profits, finally determines the nature of the usership of the site, and ultimately comes to raise the question of to what extent such policies defeat themselves; in brief, it is difficult to imagine real, genuine, reliance on such an arrangement to achieve the goals to which the SN site aspires. For example, when shopping *Amazon.com* and *eBay.com* have made names for themselves not merely because they allow economic activity to occur, but because they also undertake legal responsibilities to all users of their sites. When SN sites lack such will to assurance, they leave themselves behind in becoming truly essential to their users for much the same reason why coup-prone countries are looked on unfavorably from investors. It is the personal experience of this author that *Facebook* has deleted the account of an acquaintance due to his protesting the agricultural policies of the restaurant chain *Chipotle*; having no recourse but simply creating another account, he lost all of his pictures, applications, etc., that he had previously uploaded to the site. This

⁶² “In 2000, the parliament, perhaps inspired by their new gizmos, passed a law declaring Internet access a fundamental human right of its citizenry. A massive program is under way to expand access to the countryside, where economic development is hampered by lack of decent roads and other transportation links. The Internet, the government argues, is essential for life in the 21st century.” Woodard, Colin. “ESTONIA, WHERE BEING WIRED IS A HUMAN RIGHT”, *The Christian Science Monitor*. 07/01/2003. Available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0701/p07s01-woeu.html>

digital "unstable lightness of being" (to use Kundera's term) is foreshadowed for us in Benjamin's examination of the decline of the *flaneur* into the sandwichboard man. Benjamin locates the development of the *flaneur* in the protected spaces of the arcades, where because of a combination of architectural development (the arcades were both permanently dry and permanently well-lit, radical innovations for the time) and social developments - the constant cycles of fashion, accompanied by intense curiosity by the public as to what these fashions looked like in real life - meant that there was social value in being observed among the stores where one shopped; this social value was then turned into economic value by the social taxonomies of the daily *feullitonists* and novelists such as Balzac, Proust, and Maupassant, among others. However, as the bourgeois gradually ceased to find remarkable the newly accelerated cycles of fashion, and became accustomed to such things as seasonal changes of wardrobe, frequent washing of clothes, and exotic fabrics, the socioeconomic niche available for turning visual information into financial information was filled by the collapse of the visual aspect of the *flaneur* and the informational writing of the *feullitonist* into the low-class sandwichboard man who worked in the slowly failing arcades. The sandwichboard man filled the lowest spot in the visible public, with a majority of them being homeless and otherwise destitute. With the cessation of a provocative, innovative image, the publicly observed man fell from the height of Parisian social life to the bottom. The analogous cause in this case is that just as the *flaneur* had no materially productive place in the economy, neither does the EULA-limited internet persona compared with the aspects of the internet persona which exists in professional and business APIs and other economic niches such as writing, shopping, or public internet spaces.

The Discipline and Punishment of the Internet Persona; or the Crime of Privacy

Previously it was mentioned that SN sites serve as "training-grounds" for the development of skills necessary to navigate more "professional" APIs; what this furthermore serves to do is decide how subsequent APIs will be designed. An example of this has recently been revealed in *The New York Times* as the design for internal information sharing networks within the U.S. Intelligence services⁶³ ; while many writers have decried the open informational aspect of SN sites, rather than being a problem with the sites, this open information architecture is the most valuable aspect of the SN site. Furthermore, the arcades served as the testing grounds for iron architecture; they imitated at first nature and masonry, and came to embody their own aesthetic only after years of experimentation. In this same manner, the architecture of the open information API - the notifications of various acts and updates of individuals are the only manner of making visible the activities of the individual on what previous to such sites was a very "private" activity; and here private is meant not in the sense of "no one knows" - the tracking of the servers, hosts, etc. clearly know - but private in the sense of a nonsocial signification, more like an individual reading a book that they never discuss with anyone. Far from being a problem, this openness of the site means that it explicitly makes aware to the individual the power of information technology to track individuals in a manner which transcends perhaps their own wishes for publicity. As such, the criticisms of these sites, which generally divide the updating aspects from the information gathering aspects of the

⁶³ "In December, officials say, the agencies will introduce A-Space, a top-secret variant of the social networking Web sites [MySpace](#) and Facebook. The "A" stands for "analyst," and where Facebook users swap snapshots, homework tips and gossip, intelligence analysts will be able to compare notes on satellite photos of North Korean nuclear sites, Iraqi insurgents and Chinese missiles. A-Space will join Intellipedia, the spooks' [Wikipedia](#), where intelligence officers from all 16 American spy agencies pool their knowledge. Sixteen months after its creation, officials say, the top-secret version of Intellipedia has 29,255 articles, with an average of 114 new articles and more than 4,800 edits to articles added each workday." Shane, Scott. "Logged In and Sharing Gossip, er, Intelligence". *The New York Times*, 2/10/07. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/weekinreview/02shane.html>

sites have it quite backwards; for example, concerning *Facebook*'s "News Feed" feature, one of the most controversial elements of any SN site. When introduced, the News Feed documented virtually every change or action of the user. Almost instantly, this caused a strong negative reaction, with over 700,000 individuals eventually joining a group called "Students Against *Facebook*."⁶⁴ The company responded by introducing privacy settings for the feature, leaving it an opt-out feature:

"Will this be enough to reverse the *Facebook* backlash?" I don't think so. *Facebook* should have simply provided an "off" switch for the feature, allowing you to disable the feeds completely. Instead, they've just added more confusing privacy controls that you'll need to tweak. Opposition groups like "Students against *Facebook* News Feed" might declare a small victory, but I don't think this battle is over yet."⁶⁵

Leaving the News Feed opt-out leaves the fact that the individual still has to consider what the consequences of the news feed will be before they even discover the site itself. In other words, by leaving the setting on, *Facebook* turns what could be an experiment among some into a state of nature for the average user. The News Feed clearly appeals to certain people, and probably to most people about certain things, just as in the same way people consider the way they dress as a natural space where others will see them. The fact that updating became "natural" to the site created a feeling that some very fundamental rules about personal information were being drastically shifted, giving the immediate feeling that the informational gathering of *Facebook* is "sinister", bordering on evil surveillance. Here however, this disassociation shows that the benefits of informational technology are still related to the stunning "shock" that Benjamin felt modern society constantly creates, and attempts to eliminate. Here the two reveal the News Feed's benefit as documenting increasingly small moments of the day runs parallel

⁶⁴ boyd, danah. "Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck: Exposure, Invasion, and Social Convergence" *Convergence*. Vol. 14(1), 2008. Pgs 13-20.

⁶⁵ Cashmore, Pete. "Facebook gets egg on its Face, Changes News Feed Feature". *Mashable.com*, 9/8/2006. Available at <http://mashable.com/?p=958>

with the revelatory capacities of the technology to a degree generally missed in other forms of information gathering, such as credit card purchases, "club cards" which track product purchases and then tailor advertising, or keyword advertising, such as *Google's* AdSense. While certainly many new users are surprised by the extent of these updates, and some unpleasantly, even destructively so, very few users remain ignorant long of the importance of "tailoring" their online profiles so that they come to correspond to a publicly acceptable persona. This is a problem for some critics, but such criticism generally seems to presume that the internet's primary purpose is some sort of transcendent personal liberation, in keeping with "techno-libertarian" philosophies. Ironically, Mark Zuckerberg, a founder of *Facebook* claims himself to be a "techno-libertarian" and "transhumanist"; while his site creates a new, well-defined, and far from transcendent citizenry, he himself it claims for it revolutionary potential. There is a revolutionary potential, of course - in the Marxian sense of a reoriented class of producers and consumers becoming the dominant source of power in society through the material processes of history - but that revolutionary potential is far from the eschato-teleological orientation of either transhumanism or classical Marxism.

A striking parallel between the questions raised by SN sites and the issues confronted by Walter Benjamin meets in the question of the phantasmagoria of the interior. Basically, as the social outside became more and more conditioned by the phantasmagorias of fashion and spatiality (the arcades and Hausmannization, for Benjamin,) the bourgeois subject retreated into the interior of their homes; this of course corresponds famously with the topics covered by Foucault, Lawrence Stone, and many, many others. Suffice to say for the purposes of this work, a parallel can be shown between the development of the desire among the bourgeois for privacy and the enormous

assaults on SN sites for their lack of protection for “privacy”.

The notion that privacy is an “innate” human desire, or a commonplace quality of human existence is a fallacy; for example, Lawrence Stone, in his *Family, Marriage, and Sex: England 1500-1800* documents in several places through his work how social pressures created the private interior home we now associate with domesticity⁶⁶ ; for example, the notion of the hallway, a space merely for traversing the house, simply did not exist in the vast majority of dwellings until the 18th Century; to go through a house, one walked through functional rooms. This makes sense in terms of the structural cost of building a room whose only purpose is to allow each other room to maintain its private integrity. Furthermore, drawing on documentation from court cases regarding adultery and premarital promiscuity, Stone shows that even when individuals lived in separate houses, most people who lived in towns were intimately aware of what happened in those houses, and were not at all hesitant in charging individuals with crimes against common morality, even when the infidelities had nothing to do with their own families; it was, in short, a society where snooping was so prevalent, it makes our own notions of “Big Brother” overreach almost sacrosanct.

It is now common advice to individuals that they should never post anything to their sites that might be in the least questionable to an employer, let alone anything which might indicate illegal sympathies or activities, in the same manner that a good householder began to keep things he didn’t want the servants knowing about by putting them another room - only in this case, SN sites have the servant watching at the keyhole, bellowing the

⁶⁶ “The most striking change in the life-styles of the upper classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the increasing stress laid upon personal privacy. The great houses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been constructed of interlocking suites of rooms without corridors, so that the only way of moving about was by passing through other people’s chambers. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, house plans allocated space to corridors, which now allowed access without intruding upon privacy.” Stone, Lawrence. *Family, Marriage, and Sex: England 1500-1800*, Harper Colophon, New York, NY. Pg. 169

moment anything happens out to everyone else. In regarding the outrage evinced by the “lack” of privacy on such sites, there is a tight association between the individuals construct and the individuals bourgeois right to privacy.

Historically, the right to privacy grew out of several distinct pressures, and has a different lineage in each cultural context, which has evinced itself in differences in criticism; for example, Lev Manovich’s understanding of interactive space developed from his own history as a Soviet citizen, such that the claims of 1990’s thinkers that the internet presided over a new space for activism and personality rang hollow: “A Western artist sees the Internet as a perfect tool to break down all hierarchies and bring art to the people. In contrast, as a post-communist subject, I cannot but see the Internet as a communal apartment of the Stalin era: no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else, always present are lines for common areas such as the toilet of the kitchen.”⁶⁷ In the context of Benjamin, the construction of privacy grew out of an opposition with the pressures of the overwhelming sensorium of public spaces outside:

“Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. For the private individual, places of dwelling are for the first time opposed to places of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office.”⁶⁸ ⁶⁹ The private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. the This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of grafting onto his business interests a clear perception of his social function. In the arrangement of his private surroundings, he suppresses both of these concerns. From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior - which, for the

⁶⁷ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 2001 Pg. X

⁶⁸ Benjamin, 8

⁶⁹ For its part, the office in Benjamin is distinguished clearly from the shop counter. Nothing, per se, is sold in the offices; for Benjamin, offices are a sign of bourgeois development in alienation from intellectual labor.

private individual, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together remote locales and memories of the past. His living room is a box in the theater of the world.

The interior is the asylum where art takes refuge. The collector proves to be the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the idealization of objects. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he can bestow on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector delights in evoking a world that is not just distant and long gone but also better - a world in which, to be sure, human beings are not better provided with what they need than in the real world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.”

Or, as Balzac, writing in the period, more aphoristically put it in *Cousin Pons*: “You who can no longer drink of ‘the cup of pleasure,’ as it has been called through all ages, try to collect something, no matter what (people have been known to collect placards), so shall you receive the small change for the gold ingot of happiness. Have you a hobby? You have transferred pleasure to the plane of ideas.”⁷⁰

Here we have the notion of a private space connected with possession; such a space becomes, as it were, worthless without objects filling it; they become not merely objects for use - even the meditative use that a Saint Loyola might have put them to, or the aesthetic contemplation of a Ruskin - but objects which become the psychological definition of the personality. The collector now, on a SN site, collects a number of things - first and foremost friends, without whom many of the features are incapable of working, such as game programs, quizzes - and of course the notorious News Feed. On top of this are the many programs and media that promise more interactivity, information, and entertainment. Then there are the collections of comments, of links, of visitors, and of messages. Ultimately, the value which brings individuals back to the SN sites are largely

⁷⁰ Balzac, Honore de. *Cousin Pons* (translation: Marriage, Ellen). Project Gutenberg, 7/12/2004. Accessed 2/14/08. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/8/5/1856/1856.txt>

indistinguishable from collecting; communication is a secondary feature, given the immersion of today's individual in communicative media, communication across SN sites is merely useful, and virtually never irreplaceable through other means. Communication is easier, but the ability to make the consequences of those communications collectible through storage, updating, and notification moves communication itself through a more permanent stage of reification.

In exact measure, the physical interior has been moved into the internet as the digital home page - even Cousin Pons' bric-a-brac has been carried along; Facebook allows "gifts" of small little pictures, for a dollar a piece, that can only be purchased during a limited amount of time, and for a limited number of users. If they were transferrable - and if there were enough interest in doing so, they would quickly become transferrable - they would quite literally be indistinguishable from the real objects - not in the sense that one is material while the other is digital, but in the sense that as both have no use-value (only connoisseur value) there is no means by which one may be claimed to be functionally different from the other. Accompanying this is the gerrymandering of the boundaries between private life and public; SN sites ask in ever more precise ways - and in ways that increasingly surprise even their more involved users - what we recognize the limits of our society to be.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps it is a matter of paper; with cheaper paper manufacturing in the 18th Century, and the acceptance of paper as the primary printing material, came the world of news and entertainment that we are today so familiar with. It is worth considering that in Shakespeare's life there was nothing we would consider a newspaper, a periodical, or a journal - let alone an up-to-the minute aggregation of international stories and videos, or a notification that, say, Kit Marlowe has been thrown out of another tavern, with photos by Ben Webster. Or, consider the archiving of information; with better cataloging methods, and databases that transcend geography came the world of networked software that could identify an individual from a PIN. It is worth remembering that in the medieval period, libraries were organized by rhyme, and that the "book of law" was literally a book kept under lock and key, visible only through a grille. And it is remarkable to consider that only a hundred and fifty years ago, the idea of writing about common individuals and selling these descriptions back to them, through subscription and advertisement of novelties was absolutely novel, in terms of appealing to the hundreds of thousands who made up the new middle classes.

How this cycle of information, of viewing the average "man of the crowd", writing about him, and then watching as the consciousness of that writing rippled through the crowd, exhibited in fashion and location, in catch-phrase and figure of speech, and in transportation and construction was the study Benjamin's great last work. Through the phantasmagoria of a printed world, the urban individual came to understand how to dress, to comport themselves, to entertain themselves, and to decorate their interiors; in short, they came to understand how to behave as they consumed, how to care for their possessions, and what values were necessary to keep those possessions. It was a

development useful for socializing a huge urban influx from the countryside, even as Hausmannization changed Paris to keep them from rioting. Removed from field and town their authorities and wisdoms and customs, the new Parisians flocked to the arcades and the shops, to the boulevards and the restaurants (created by the out-of-work kitchen staffs of the *ancien regime*) to learn not what it meant, say, to be Corsican or Norman or Alsatian, but what it mean to be modern.

From this, individuals developed more and more complicated forms of communicating their status, their beliefs, and their occupations; in fashion, in transportation, and in leisure, the individual's capacities for expressivity were matched only by their capacities for consumption; poverty became not a constant state of chance, as it did once in a countryside crushed by taxes and *corvees*, subsisting from one seasonal harvest to another, but rather the state of being unable to consume. The individual began to live in a world where a stranger would not know their name, but know the name of their tailor and haberdasher of the suit he wore.

The condition of urban alienation - not in its most striking, *Midnight Cowboy*-esque forms, but in its quotidian forms of not knowing ones' neighbors, working with people one does not see outside of work, and not knowing the people one shops from or walks past on the sidewalk - remains a constant of our lives. Perhaps it has become even more common; the average American moves into a new house once every twelve years or so, and has slightly less than four "close" friends, according to social scientists. And while there remains a steep digital divide in this country - one third of all Americans don't use the internet regularly, and have no interest in using it - young people are expected to do at least their typing on computers, and increasingly multi-media projects, research, and coursework. And business expect their employees to be familiar with the email system,

the database, and the payroll for their hours.

The consequence of this is that the conditions of Benjamin's Paris bear more than a passing resemblance to the contemporary scene. Indeed, the world is claimed, if not this year then either soon or recently, to be more than half urban, and by the end of the decade, over seven billion cell phones will have been built. The conditions of modern urbanity remain with us, and so far as they do, they will continue to have structural similarities with the first developing of modern urbanity, just as a farmer today could learn something about husbandry from Virgil's *Georgics* or a soldier about martial culture from Homer's *Iliad*.

What remains troubling is the sense that while the development of Parisian consumer culture was immediately dependent on clear financial goals and gains, the development of the SA and SN site appear to lack the aesthetic and financial rewards that drove Granville, Baudelaire, and Dore. Who makes money commenting on news stories, voting on links, collecting friends, or hosting an online event? What is the value, beyond novelty, in these online gadgets and frivolities?

In one sense, it's possible to say that certain aspects of the 19th century that have been discussed have mirror contemporaries; Marx's belief in the fetishization of currency - rather than productive capital - finds its intellectual parallel on a lower level in the Federal Reserve-hating followers of Ron Paul, very few *flaneurs* were *feullitonists*, or made any money from their peacockeries, and the vast majority of newspapers, magazines, and journals from the period have been entirely lost, let alone remained successful across the years. But there was more than simple novelty at work then - the ideal of improvement through industry and technology thrived, and the bourgeois belief in progress was equalled only by its belief in its moral superiority over other classes and peoples.

Benjamin discussed the role of the exhibition in fueling this progressive fantasy of the bourgeois; what are the exhibitions of today presenting us?

The source of the most visionary, if most hyperbolic progressive plans has already been hinted at - transhumanism, or the belief that after "the Singularity", technology and humanity will have merged so completely that the current problems of production, communication, longevity, and competition will be transformed, if not completely eliminated. Transhumanism, and its political "wing" or philosophical aspect, "technolibertarianism", hold that these informational transformations are the product of ever-increasing gains, gains which are accumulating so fast that they will soon outstrip the ability of mere humans to calculate or influence. The most famous example of this is Moore's law, after a founder of computer chip maker Intel, which states that computer processor speeds will double every eighteen months; this prediction, made in the 1970's, has remained accurate until today; if this continues, according to Ray Kurzweil, we will have a computer with all the simulated capacities of the brain sometime before 2050. More quotidian debates concern the viability of artistic production when digital copying and file-sharing is as easy as checking one's email, the damage of multitasking and media immersion on children's morals, and the perennial concerns of large business interests and/or governments in acquiring and stymying the "natural" development of the internet and communications technology in general.

Behind this is the belief that we are at point where the material concerns of existence, have, in essence been solved; what remains are the means of simply developing the technology appropriately so that the most difficult problems of our era, or of humanity, become irrelevant. The beliefs of the most technologically capable and cognizent will serve as the template for which the rest of humanity, in awe of the material

capacities of that techno-elite, will gladly conform themselves. The technolibertarian and the transhumanist represent a new version of the bourgeois in their assumptions of technological determinism and progress. This is not to judge the validity of the debates, their importance, or the possibility of technological advance, but to say that the claims of transhumanists and technolibertarians that the internet is a completely new media is not borne out, at least so far as SA and SN sites are concerned; they are, rather, the newest spread in bourgeois development, made novel only by the temporal and memorial capacities of the internet to change the ratios of time and loss.