

1 HERE TO STAY

Interviews with Paul Saffo, James Truman, Chris Anderson,
Neil Stevenson, and DJ Spooky



On leaf of palm, on sedge-wrought roll;
on plastic clay and leather scroll, man wrote his thoughts;
the ages passed, and lo! the Press was found at last!

John Greenleaf Whittier, 1807–1892, American poet, reformer, and author

WE WANT TO TELL STORIES, send messages, record music, communicate with one another and to posterity: these desires make us human, and we are not going to stop doing them any time soon. The media that we use are in constant flux, so it is surprising that each individual medium seems to be around longer than expected. You may not have written much recently on “leaf of palm” or “sedge-wrought roll,” but if you are marooned on a desert island and want to put a message in a bottle, you may be quite happy to pick up a long neglected medium and scratch out the words on the nearest frond.

The notion of the “paperless office” dates back to the 1960s and seemed plausible for decades.

As computers began to spread and display technology improved, it seemed obvious that more and more documents would be written, distributed and read in electronic form, rather than on paper. Filing cabinets would give way to hard disks, memos and reports would be distributed electronically and paper invoices and purchase orders would be replaced by electronic messages whizzing between accounts departments. What actually happened was that global consumption of office paper more than doubled in the last two decades of the twentieth century, as digital technology made printing cheaper and easier than ever before. Not even the rise of the Internet stemmed the tide. The web’s billions of pages provided a vast new source of fodder for the world’s humming printers.¹

Paper is here to stay. Indeed, paper is hard to compete with precisely because it has so many wonderful qualities: It looks beautiful, with



← Paper
photos by Nicolas Zurcher

¹ “Technological Comebacks: Not Dead, Just Resting,” *The Economist*, October 9, 2008. http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12381449.

many choices of smoothness, brilliance of white, depth of black, and richness of color. It feels luxurious as you turn a page or sense the bite of the granularity as you scribe or sketch. It's amazingly light and portable and an excellent storage medium. It even smells good—don't you enjoy the smell of new paper and fresh ink as you browse the bookstore?

Bookstores are here to stay because they offer a rich multisensory experience of looking at images, text, the environment around us and other people; feeling the heft of the book and the suppleness of the paper; listening to ambient sounds and the murmur of conversation; and smelling coffee brewing with the hint of cinnamon from a Danish pastry. By comparison the online convenience of Amazon seems efficient but dull.

For this book I have selected people to interview who have contributed new ideas and designs, both in the traditional media and in the emerging new media, as the relationship between the two categories is so fraught with uncertainty and fuel for innovation. In this first chapter we meet people who believe that the traditional media are here to stay to a surprising extent—that books, magazines, film, television, and radio will never go away. They also see profound changes taking place as the new media shake up financial models and offer alternative sources for many attributes that formerly belonged with the traditional media.

In the first interview that follows, with Paul Saffo, you will discover that even this techno-savvy forecaster living in California's Silicon Valley still captures his thoughts and observations about new technologies on the paper pages of old-fashioned bound journals. The new media of the digital revolution might add new possibilities for us and broaden alternatives for communication, record keeping, and creativity, but those traditional media seem surprisingly persistent, even if transmogrified. Paul points out that old media forms never die out entirely—they get repurposed for other uses and stay with us. He gives us an overview of the state of media in the past, present, and future, explaining that what we called mass media was all we had, but we are now creating a whole new world of personal media. He also reveals his S-curve method for forecasting and describes the attributes of the “creator economy.”

In the second interview we meet James Truman, one of the most influential voices in the Condé Nast magazine portfolio for more than a decade. James, like Paul Saffo, expects traditional media to survive in repurposed forms.

James was instrumental in introducing Chris Anderson to his role as editor in chief of *Wired* magazine. Chris is featured in the next interview. He explains his conviction that while the acts of journalism, editing, and distribution are here to stay, the forms that contain the content will vary to fit the vehicle. Lavishly produced magazines will be published, but people will choose online versions of content when they are seeking factual information or communal connectivity.

Neil Stevenson contrasts the way in which we consume media, either sitting back to luxuriate in the material that is offered, as in a beautifully produced magazine or a movie, or leaning forward to steer or click, as in a Web search or a message dialog. He also recounts his experiment with user-generated content.

Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky: That Subliminal Kid, is a New York-based artist, writer, music composer and producer, DJ, political commentator, and impresario. In the final interview of this chapter, he talks about the new order of creative commons and shareware, which, he argues, is here to stay, and he points to the repurposing of the vinyl record as a control device for digital manipulation.

PAUL SAFFO

Interviewed July 31, 2008



PAUL SAFFO

Paul is a forecaster and essayist with more than twenty years of experience exploring long-term technological change and its practical impact on business and society. He teaches at Stanford University and is a visiting scholar in the Stanford Media X research network, studying the design and use of interactive technologies. He was the founding chairman of the Samsung Science Board and serves on a variety of other boards, including the Long Now Foundation, the Singapore National Research Foundation Science Advisory Board, and the Pax Group. Paul has also been as an advisor and forum fellow of the World Economic Forum since 1997. He is a columnist for ABCNews.com, and his essays have appeared in numerous publications, including the *Harvard Business Review*, *Fortune*, *Wired*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. He is a fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences and holds degrees from Harvard College, Cambridge University, and Stanford University.

← Paul Saffo
photos by author

Paul and I have been friends for many years. In 2005 professor Fritz Prinz, the chairman of Stanford's Mechanical Engineering Department, asked him to advise the faculty about the future of engineering design. Instead of proposing a consulting project, Paul suggested that he teach a course on the subject to allow him to harness the collective wisdom of the students. He asked me to help him teach the class, so I had an excellent opportunity to learn more about his way of thinking and the tools that he employs to forecast the future. I enjoy and admire his intellectual prowess and curiosity, his deep knowledge of history, and his ability to tell stories that fascinate his audiences.

When we were preparing material for the course, Paul sent me an email titled "Nerd Fun," with a photo attached of him staring through an esoteric surveying instrument—his baseball cap was on backward as he peered toward the future through the lens. The course ran from January to March 2006. We interviewed experts, developed timelines and maps, and asked the students to prepare papers to support their ideas about the future of engineering. The output was presented to the full faculty of the Mechanical Engineering Department as a workshop. It helped them generate strategic policy for the future. My understanding of Paul's point of view and his contributions as a featured lecturer to the Stanford Publishing Courses for Professionals made me sure that he would be a good person to interview about what is happening in media.

Paul is an outdoorsman who lives in the hills between the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. He leads emergency rescue teams in the precipitous woods, and I interviewed him in front of a redwood. He gives us an overview of past and present media and looks to the future as well.

MASS MEDIA AND PERSONAL MEDIA

Paul fights a losing battle to define himself as a forecaster rather than a futurist. He characterizes forecasters as objective bystanders who focus on what they think will happen; futurists, in his estimation, tend to be advocates, telling you what they think should happen. As a forecaster, he gravitates toward things that don't fit—a surprising offhand comment by an expert, an event that seems out of the norm, or an artifact that grabs his attention. Because such items by definition don't fit into a category, he captures them in an old-fashioned bound journal along with ideas, essay fragments, and the odd observation. Given the nature of his work, it may seem surprising that his journal isn't electronic, but he uses paper because he still finds it superior to digital media. It is faster to open and far easier to jot down a note in his leather-bound journal than it would be on his laptop or a PDA. It is more flexible: he can easily mix sketches and text and even paste in other objects, and he expects to still be able to read his notes on paper long after his digital files have rotted away into a cloud of random electrons. He demonstrates that the value of paper as a medium is timeless, insisting that paper is here to stay.

Paul points out that we are becoming “paperless” the way we once became “horseless.” There are nearly as many horses in the United States today as there were in 1900, but they no longer serve as the dominant engines of transportation. Old media forms never die out entirely; they get repurposed. The role of paper has changed over the past twenty years from being a storage medium to an interface medium, used for review. People used to store things on paper and put them in file cabinets or on shelves, but electronics now provide the place for safekeeping. A Bible in the hands of the most devout

← Paul Saffo's Journal
photo by Nicolas Zurcher



Christian still spends more time on a shelf gathering dust than actually being read. With the advent of the laser printer in the late 1980s, we started using paper as interface—printing on demand, enjoying the high resolution and contrast ratio to read the content, and then throwing it away. Paper is here to stay, but Paul explains that the way we are electing to use it is changing.

I’ve paid a lot of attention to media just because it’s some of the fastest moving water in the current technology revolution. We’re right in the middle of a massive shift from an information world to a media world. The difference is that we think of it as information when there isn’t very much of it and it isn’t very important, but when information becomes much greater in volume and much greater in importance it becomes media. Media is information gone deep into our lives.

We have had media revolutions before, and we have lived in [Marshall] McLuhan’s mass media age for the past half-century, but this is a different kind of media revolution. We called it “mass media” when it was the only media we had, but now we are creating a new world of “personal media.” We are seeing a whole new personal media order intruding and shoving the old mass media titans aside.

Twentieth-century mass media was a revolution because it delivered the world to our living rooms, but, in fact, all we could do is press our nose against the glass and watch—we couldn’t participate. To the extent that you participated with mass media, you participated by consuming things. You watched the ads and you went out and bought stuff, or you sent a letter to the editor. The editor would get hundreds of letters; they would print three and edit several paragraphs out of the ones they deigned to publish. That was interactivity in the mass media world.

The personal media world, in contrast, is a world where answering back is not an option—it’s required. Otherwise, you don’t have the personal media experience. Take Google. You don’t watch Google. Watching Google would be like watching the test pattern on a TV (before test patterns went away).



Wikipedia
screen capture

If you don’t put something into Google first, you don’t get something out. That’s the world of personal media, where there are no bystanders; you have to participate to have the experience. That is profoundly new territory for people designing systems.

Consider the difference between Wikipedia and *Encyclopædia Britannica*. The only person writing for the *Encyclopædia Britannica* was either an employee or a certified “real smart” person, perhaps a professor. In the personal media world we have Wikipedia, where anybody who cares to go to the trouble of writing gets to create an entry, but it’s a very small percentage of the people who consult Wikipedia who actually put in entries. Even though the door says “all are welcome,” most people just read.

Thanks to the small percentage of people who actually write pieces for Wikipedia, the site looks like a mass medium to the average person who benefits from the result. Someone who wants to know about something looks it up just as he or she would in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, but more conveniently. The small proportion of users who also contribute indicates that most people will not participate unless it is quick and easy. Writing an entry is too large a task, so the personal media world is evolving minimal formats, such as Twitter. Paul provides this example:

So, we’re friends, and I walk up to you and say, “Would you write something for me?” and you say, “Sure.”

I say, “Well, you know, I need a 900-page volume on competitiveness, something like what Michael Porter does.” You would clear your throat and find an excuse, and duck the assignment.

I say, “Okay, well—no, what I really want is a 250-page best seller like what Geoff Moore does, pithy and practical. You know, it’s not too hard.” And you would still back away.

And I say, “Okay, I take it back, 20 pages.” And you say, “Well ... maybe in a couple of months.”

But if I say, “Actually, I only need a page—no, I don’t need a page, not even a paragraph. I need Haiku. Seventeen syllables, it doesn’t even have to rhyme. Just give me a search string to put into Google.” And you’ll say, “Sure!”

The secret design principle—what I’ll call Saffo’s law—that encourages participation in a personal media world is this: the smaller the quantum of creative act you ask of participants, the more they participate. Ask for a message of not over 140 characters, a search string, or just a click, and you can create successful personal media. Paul points to Rin, a twenty-one-year-old Japanese woman who wrote the best-selling novel *If You*. It was being dished out one screen at a time to cell phones but became so popular that it was published as a hardcover book in 2008, selling more than 400,000 copies.

Bringing us back to the relationship between mass and personal media, Paul explains three characteristic differences:

1. *The nature of the experience.* With mass media, you watch, but with personal media, you participate.
2. *The location.* Mass media came into our living rooms, but you carry personal media with you everywhere you go.
3. *The nature of the dominant players.* Mass media was the world of the few and the large—the big Hollywood producers, the big TV networks, and the widely circulated newspapers and magazines—but the personal media world is dominated by the many and the small. Paul expands on this:



Google's performance history
screen capture

There are vastly more players in this current revolution. However, what I most emphatically do not mean is that the big players are dinosaurs and the age of the big player is over. In fact, we are going to see media players in the personal media world that will dwarf the largest of today’s mass media giants, but they are going to get big only by engaging the many and the small. Google is a good indicator. The Google founders are richer than God because they have monetized our search strings.

Google also benefitted by being the first search engine to go big, causing a sweeping momentum that is very hard for competitors to follow. Just the fact that the votes come from the many and the small means that the designs that capture the volume of use gain an advantage that can easily dominate.



← Lotus pond at the
Robinson House, California
photo courtesy of Phaedra.biz

THE S-CURVE

A simple rule of thumb that one can apply to the uncertain realm of forecasting is this: look for something that's been failing for about twenty years. Mention it to your friends or your coworkers. They'll say, "Oh yeah, we tried that almost twenty years ago. It'll never happen." That may well be an indicator that the end of the flat part of the S-curve is near and takeoff is approaching. The wise gambler may take this as a sign and immediately look at the topic with a renewed interest, probably seizing the opportunity to sign up, invest, or get involved. Most of us suffer a psychological barrier when it comes to accepting this potential gift because we tend to be linear thinkers; S-curves are nonlinear phenomena. Paul uses this insight to see more clearly through the oncoming haze, and he applies it directly to media.

Any entrepreneurs who try to do anything with media today, whether they realize it or not, are embarking on a journey along the S-curve of innovation that is riskier than [Mr.] Toad's Wild Ride. In Silicon Valley, we don't draw it as an S-shaped curve; we draw it as a hockey stick because it never ends. We focus on the inflection point—the place where it takes off. In general, people try doing things for about twenty years, and just when they give up and say, "No, that will never happen," that's when the revolution arrives.

The interesting thing about this phenomenon is that we've seen it before. The pattern of change, the general shape of change, is not unlike earlier innovations. And the best part of this personal media revolution is that, even though the media are profoundly different, they very closely follow the pattern of innovation seen during the birth of mass media in the early 1950s. As a forecaster, I spend a lot of time looking at history because, as Mark Twain was alleged to have said (he didn't

actually say it, but we don't know who did), "History doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes."

History rhymes quite a lot when it comes to innovation. So if you want to have a sense of how things are going to unfold over the next ten or twenty years, it doesn't hurt to look back at previous decades.

Even though we live in the middle of this nonlinear change, it's hard for us to understand it. Paul refers to a metaphor presented by Donella Meadows, a pioneering American environmental scientist, in her 1972 book *Limits to Growth*.

Imagine you are a very lazy gardener with a pond in your backyard, and there is a single lotus in the pond. You think, "I've got to do something about that because the lotus will take over the pond, but I'll wait. I'll wait until the pond's half full and clean it out then, because I like the lotus." Let's assume at day one that there's one lotus, and at the end of day thirty the pond is completely full of lotus, with no space left. So you ask yourself: On what day is the pond half full? Well, a linear thinker would say, around day fifteen, but in fact, it isn't half-full until the twenty-ninth day because of the exponential nature of the growth. Until then, the lazy gardener would think that not much was happening, and wake up to quite a surprise on the thirtieth day.

That's what's going to happen with media. You're going to hear the steady, sonic boom of one inflection point after another tunneling through the zeitgeist in this media revolution; one big company after another coming out of nowhere, like Google; one surprise after another; one opportunity after another. The secret to success is to think in a nonlinear way and to stay entrepreneurial.

Ordinary people get surprised when that inflection point arrives after a twenty-year lag and suddenly changes the world. Like, "Oh my god, where did the PC come from?" or, "Where did

the World Wide Web come from?" The problem for you all as professionals is, as visionaries, you now get to be wrong twice, because you're going to stand at the start of that S-curve and think that the inflection point is going to arrive a lot more quickly than it actually does, but by the time it does arrive, you will have dismissed it and say it's not happening at all. So, remember the rule: if you want a short-term success, look for something that's been failing for twenty years!

Another piece of advice is to remember Leo Baekeland. In 1907 Baekeland invented Bakelite plastic, a thermosetting resin. What did they do with this marvelous, new material? They spent their whole time making it look like old stuff. They made it look like wood and tortoise shell because they weren't comfortable with Bakelite just looking like plastic. Then after about ten or fifteen years everybody realized that Bakelite was a poor substitute for wood and tortoise shell but a marvelous material in its own right. So society collectively concluded, "Let's let plastic be plastic." And then things got interesting. You can see "Bakelite thinking" all over new media today, where people are trying to use a new thing to imitate an old thing.

As you observe our fast-changing revolution, look for the underlying constants. Look for what's permanent. Look for the deep behaviors. New terms like *blog* and *tweet* are intellectual ablative shields (the heat shield on a spacecraft that keeps the astronauts from burning up); they keep us from going crazy while we're entering the atmosphere of new media. Be careful how you use them and don't use them in a place that is going to be preserved for a long time, because you'll find yourself twenty years from now looking at that media term with the equivalent sense of, "Oh God, I can't believe I wore those glasses with the really big frames or that jacket made out of polyester."



Ads for Zenith Lazy Bones

THE CREATOR ECONOMY

The first television remote controller was developed by the Zenith Radio Corporation in 1950. It was connected to the television by a wire and marketed under the name “Lazy Bones.” Unfortunately, the bulky wire often got in the way and people kept tripping over it. Zenith tried again with a cord-free design invented by Eugene Polley, and in 1955 launched the Flash-Matic. This looked like a cross between a pistol and a flashlight. It had a single button that controlled the volume, without anything to change the channel or turn the TV on and off. Eugene McDonald, the CEO of Zenith, was an idealist who believed that television would change the world for the better but that advertisers would stand in the way of the medium’s ability to revolutionize education and enlighten us all. The remote was his secret weapon to empower consumers to conquer the advertisers; the moment a nasty ad came on, you’d aim the thing at the screen and pull the trigger. The light would flash at a photo diode on the television, turning off the sound during the ads. Unfortunately, the photo diode could be confused by other light sources, so if your TV faced a window, the headlights from a passing car could kill the sound right in the middle of your show of shows. A deeper problem was that consumers did not want to turn the ads off, as advertisers were clever enough to amuse people, so in short order, the Flash-Matic failed.

← Zenith Flash-Matic and Space Commander 200 photos by Nicolas Zurcher



A year later Robert Adler, an engineer from Vienna who also worked at Zenith, created the Space Command remote control, using ultrasound



Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog
screen capture from DrHorrible.com

instead of light, with buttons to change the channel as well as to adjust the volume. When a button on the remote control was pushed, it clicked and struck a bar, hence the term *clicker*. Each bar emitted a different frequency and circuits in the television detected the noise. The design succeeded, in spite of the fact that some people, especially young women, could hear the piercing ultrasonic signals. Paul points out that we are experiencing that sort of experimentation with new media today.

Inventors and entrepreneurs are engaged in a conversation with the consumer, trying to figure out what this stuff should be and how it should be used. That's why every week we have a new interactive media experience. One week it's Twitter, and the next week it's something new like Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog on the Web, which two weeks from now will be ancient history. It's this period of mad, wild experimentation. The lesson to take away is to be like Zenith. If you have a failure, ask yourself why it failed. This is a period of interesting failures, which when pursued can lead to real success.

The feedback loop is tightly linked today between producer and participant. It's not producer and consumer, because there aren't consumers anymore. It's producer and participant. It's fast and tight. You'd better listen to the participant or you're going to be in big trouble! This loop has created a huge headache for the mass media incumbents that are like battleships on the ocean, cruising along and telling us where we should go. It's great news for people who respond very quickly, but it's also a challenge. The revolution is picking up speed. We're building the railroad we're riding on. The image to

think about is that you've got a train going at seventy miles an hour down the tracks, and you're trying to lay tracks six inches in front of the engine.

Meanwhile, remember that revolutions always beget revolutions. In 1517 Martin Luther tacked a memo to a church door and suddenly the pope lost half of his market share because of the printing press. Today, there is an economic shift afoot. You have to go back a hundred years to see what's happening. A hundred years ago we had an emerging industrial economy. It was about manufacturing. And the symbol of that economy was the time clock, with the central actor being the worker. It was all about making things, and the preoccupation of the time was how could we make enough stuff, cheaply enough, to satisfy the desires of an emergent middle class. By 1950 the manufacturers were really good at that. They had gradually overcome scarcity.

By the end of World War II, when the manufacturers stopped making bombs and airplanes and tanks and went back to making consumer goods, to their horror they discovered that they were now so good at making stuff that they were making more stuff than people wanted. And that was the moment at which the manufacturing economy ended and was replaced by the consumer economy. The central actor was no longer the worker, the person who made things, but the consumer, the person who purchased things. The symbol of that economy was no longer the time clock, the relentless robot of worker efficiency, but the credit card, the charge card that allowed people to purchase more than they could afford. Well, we've had that for the last fifty years and it's coming to an end.

We're on the third turning. The new central actor in this economy is neither the worker, the person who makes things, nor the consumer, the person who purchases, but a new economic actor who does both activities at the very same moment. Call them "creators" (not "creatives," who are the elites who make beautiful things that the rest of us want to buy). Creators are ordinary, anonymous individuals with a new role in this new economy. A creator is an economic actor who

in one and the same act both creates and consumes. They may not even realize that they are creating, and they sometimes don't even know they are consuming. Wikipedia allows anybody to create an entry, as do MySpace and YouTube.

The best example is Google, because you have to create in order to get results. If you don't put a search string in, that act of creation, you don't get the results out. It changes the basic economic proposition. Think about what your Google subscription [cost] last month—that would be zero. Google is bigger than YouTube because more people put in search strings than produce videos. Somewhere out there in a garage, some entrepreneurs are discovering how to make people create with a single click. Or, better yet, with no click at all, just by living their lives. The company that discovers that will dwarf Google in size.

I think this creator economy is going to last a couple of decades, just like the last couple of economies did. I have no idea what's after it. Ask me in thirty years.

THE NEXT INTERVIEW IS WITH JAMES TRUMAN, who earned the nickname “Prince of Condé Nast” after his meteoric rise to editorial director of the company's entire portfolio of magazines. In the following interview, James asks whether media may be displaced by technology, as the word *media* implies something that intermediates, coming between an organization and an audience, while the Internet allows a direct conversation between creators and consumers, sometimes as members of communities, but also within the actions of single individuals as suggested by Paul Saffo's concept of the “creator economy.”

James gives an overview of the changes in magazine design during his tenure at Condé Nast and describes his more recent search for meaning in direct communal experiences. He expects traditional media to reemerge, after a period of decline, in forms that are more luxurious, with magazines reveling in the highest quality imagery and books moving from text to colorful works of art with exquisite bindings and accessories.

JAMES TRUMAN

Interviewed December 20, 2008



← James Truman
photos by author

JAMES TRUMAN

James grew up in Nottingham, in the middle of England, but left as soon as he could. His father wanted him to be an accountant and sent him to study accounting, but he left after just one day. His real desire was to be in the music world in some way, but because he didn't have the right musical talents for either composing or performing, he started writing reviews for weekly music papers. He eventually got a staff job at one of them, *Melody Maker* in London, and after a short stint there he moved to New York and found himself feeling at home. He wrote a monthly column about music and life in the city that never sleeps for the London based *The Face* magazine. Condé Nast, America's biggest magazine publisher, bought a controlling interest in *The Face* and admired the contribution that James was making. He was soon appointed features editor at *Vogue*. After just eighteen months he was placed in charge of his own magazine, *Details*, and made such a success of it that in 1994, at the age of thirty-four, James was appointed to oversee all of Condé Nast's magazines, including *Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *Wired*. Eleven years later, he walked away from his role as the "Prince of Condé Nast" to experiment with interactive workshops and happenings.

I was lucky to be able to interview James in Napa Valley, not so far away from my home base, where he was spending Christmas with friends on the Francis Ford Coppola estate. Gene Celso, the video guru at IDEO who helped me record many of these interviews, and I arrived in the late morning of one of those sunny winter days in California that flood the landscape with gentle light and warmth. We connected with James at a local restaurant and he guided us into the heart of the estate, where he was staying in a visitor's cottage. He sat in the window with the sun dappling through the trees outside, with Roman Coppola sitting in to listen to his story.

At first James seems a little diffident, perhaps because he still speaks in the manner of his English origin, but one soon warms to his intellect and lively wit, which are enhanced by his engaging and impish grin.



← Girl and horse
photo by Comstock Images

FROM DECLINE TO LUXURY

James is interested in what happens to media whose value has expired. What happens to old media that is outmoded or obsolete—the paper telephone directory, the magazine listing current events, or the silent movie? He refers to the ideas penned by Marshall McLuhan in the 1970s, which resonate with the fate of today’s newspapers and magazines. McLuhan used the analogy of what happened to the horse after the invention of the automobile. It was no longer the most functional, efficient, or utilitarian technology; the car displaced it. But the horse didn’t disappear. The horse *business* went into a decline but much more slowly than predicted. The number of horses went down incrementally each year and then started rebounding after World War II, as they became thought of as a luxury item. James predicts that media will change in a very similar way:

For the things I grew up with, particularly magazines, that is the most likely fate. I don’t think that they’ll go away, but I think they need to become more expensive. They’re not going to have that mainstream, news-breaking or news-gathering function that they had. They’re going to be luxury objects comparable to coffee-table books.

I have a friend who runs a publishing company and they do incredibly well by making books that have lots of pouches and cutouts and little add-ons, so the book goes from being a very predictable item to a format that’s almost like a kit. It’s like a box of goodies. I think that’s one way books will go, becoming coffee-table books, like what Taschen is doing; these huge, extravagant projects. That’s more likely to be the future of the book than the paperback for two dollars.

The early nineties was the beginning of what became the luxury industrial complex, where the idea of luxury just



← Vogue magazine
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

infiltrated everything. Every marketing idea, every product, had to have had some thought about, “What is luxury? What is a luxury good? What is a luxury brand?” I think we’ll look back on this as one of the most uninteresting phases in cultural history. Louis XIV became Louis Vuitton!

During this period luxury brands used fashion advertisements with exaggerated images of outrageously expensive items and didn’t worry about selling many of them because designers made their money from selling less-expensive products like underwear or purses. They needed to be noticed in the ad in *Vogue*, so that mall customers would spend \$35 for underwear rather than \$12.

WHISPERS AND SECRETS

In 2005 James decided to search for a new adventure that would offer *direct* rather than *mediated* experience. He wanted to explore and better understand the notion of what a real community is and feels like in the time of virtual community—what it means to create knowledge as entertainment. He has developed a traveling show called *Big Night in Tent*, which harnesses both the people who travel with the show and those in the communities that they visit. They offer a one- or two-week happening that introduces new ideas one-on-one, viscerally, through a kind of display or fair. In one event, they took over an estate on the Hudson River and invited local families from every walk of life to participate. They put kids in cottages, so that they could live with circus performers, and they created a show in the barn on Saturday night. The adults had their own program of learning and discussion, but the kids were running the show. They invited everyone in the “village” to the performance.

We were just playing with a lot of ideas. The last one really worked. It had some sort of transformational quality about it, which was what interested me about it in the beginning—of letting knowledge and connection and surprise create magic.

I’m interested in whispers and secrets. I’m not interested in announcements and marketing campaigns. I’m averse to brand at this point. I think it’s an ugly, discredited philosophy that



Varekai by Cirque du Soleil
photo courtesy of Creative Commons

has been part of why the last fifteen years have been so boring, as much as the rise of hedge funds and money culture has. I think brands are poison, so I don't want to become a brand.

The people who were there all exchanged addresses, and there's been email communication. We've even put up a page on Flickr—just people who came and the snapshots they took. It's an open page. I am not too fascistic about this. In the age of information proliferation, the idea of the secret becomes quite exciting, and I'm excited by the idea of secret much more than I am by another piece of marketed media.

When asked if this shared experience can be designed, James shies away from the idea, as that would imply that one is thinking of it as a brand. He wants to develop a sentiment rather than a form, but design and brand are defined as forms. He would be interested in continuously changing the form to prevent it from becoming a repeatable event. It should be a movement rather than a show, like Cirque du Soleil, which revolutionized the concept of circus but spent two years and \$60 million finding a form that could be repeated. Cirque du Soleil is beautifully designed and very successful, and people like to see something spectacular on that scale, but James is interested in something that is internally spectacular, not showbiz spectacular.



Burning Man
photo by Eve Coste-Maniere

TRANSPARENT MEDIA

James welcomes the erosion of media and branding as codified forms developed by skillful designers to be repeated in the service of business and profit. He has spent long enough in an office on the top floor of a Manhattan high-rise; he is searching for a more ecological and communal experience. He enjoys the prospect of people being empowered to create things themselves, similar to the “creator” concept from Paul Saffo—James calls it “transparent media.”

I'm sort of throwing out ideas that entertain me, because I'm allowed to be entertained by ideas at this point in my life. And of course, what always happens is that some new experience comes up, it finds a form, it becomes a brand, it gets marketed as such, and then the life is sucked out of it. I'm just interested in what happens in the early stages rather than the later stages of that.

I was at Burning Man the last couple of years. At the end, we left with about ten people in a little coach and everyone

was keeping the vibe going until we turned a certain corner when there was cell phone service, then everybody got their Blackberries out and they were gone: the community was broken. There's all this worry at Burning Man about whether commercial interests are going to come in and spoil it, and the simplest way to ruin Burning Man is to put a cell phone satellite above it. Suddenly you wouldn't have it: it would be lost, categorically lost.

I'm not really taking a moral position. I just feel that I'm noticing that media has stopped being material and has become transparent. Everyone can make a movie now with very simple software. So that is the end of a certain idea of media, and with that type of transparency will come new issues. And we don't quite know what they are yet. Right now, it's like hobby day at school—you stop getting lectured and start making crafts yourself. I don't know if that gives you the right to run the whole curriculum, but we'll see.

Media is in a very, very interesting phase. I remember years ago, how people would say that in the future technology is going to become invisible. I even remember fashion designers who would sew microprocessors into the lapels of jackets with some unforeseen future consequence of being wired and connected. So media was announcing the disappearance of technology, but what's happening now is that technology is announcing the disappearance of media. The word *media* implies something that intermediates—that mediates between an institution and the public, or an event and a reader, or whatever. That role seems to be less and less useful, and less and less needed.

News stories on the Web seem to be becoming the equivalent of the CDOs, those weird financial instruments that brought down the banking system, where many mortgages are sliced up and put back together. You read a story and find that it has a little bit of *New York Times* reporting in it, perhaps a little bit of *Los Angeles Times* reporting, plus a little bit of gossip, and then a little bit of something that someone made up. Underneath there is a response by a blogger that seems interesting,

but you don't know if the blogger has actually been paid to write it by a big corporation or if it's what the author really thinks.

Traditional media offers a chaperoned experience—material is handed to you by people who were experts in a field and could claim some sense of objectivity and responsibility. New media mixes and matches material that is created objectively and subjectively, and it is difficult to tell the difference or hold anyone accountable. Wikipedia is being created as a community effort: different viewpoints are accumulated and policed. James sees this ongoing conversation as a replacement for traditional media, which was never conversational—it was authoritarian. Compare Wikipedia with a church magazine. You know the people who made the parish magazine, but you don't know the people who are contributing to Wikipedia, why they're making it, or for whom.

While it is a community enterprise, it's an interesting phase of facelessness of who the instigators are. Who are the authorities in that? I feel that, just as CDOs went through the system and caused havoc, something is going to happen in this new technology that'll cause havoc.

I was always fascinated by how it was a misunderstanding on the telephone that really started World War I, because the phone call should have been made after the assassination of the archduke, but people didn't understand the technology; it wasn't made and the war began. And I think there's going to be some misunderstanding or misuse of this new sense of media technology that will probably have some very contagious and dramatic effect in our lifetimes.”



The Face
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

DESIGNING MAGAZINES

Soon after James arrived in New York at the age of twenty-two, he started writing for a new British magazine called *The Face*. It was the first magazine to combine a sense of style and glossy production values with gritty street smarts and a connection to edgy popular music. It was a break from the punk rock era, when musical magazines expressed themselves in newsprint, graffiti, and ransom notes for logos. People had their fill of punk rock and wanted to get dressed up again.

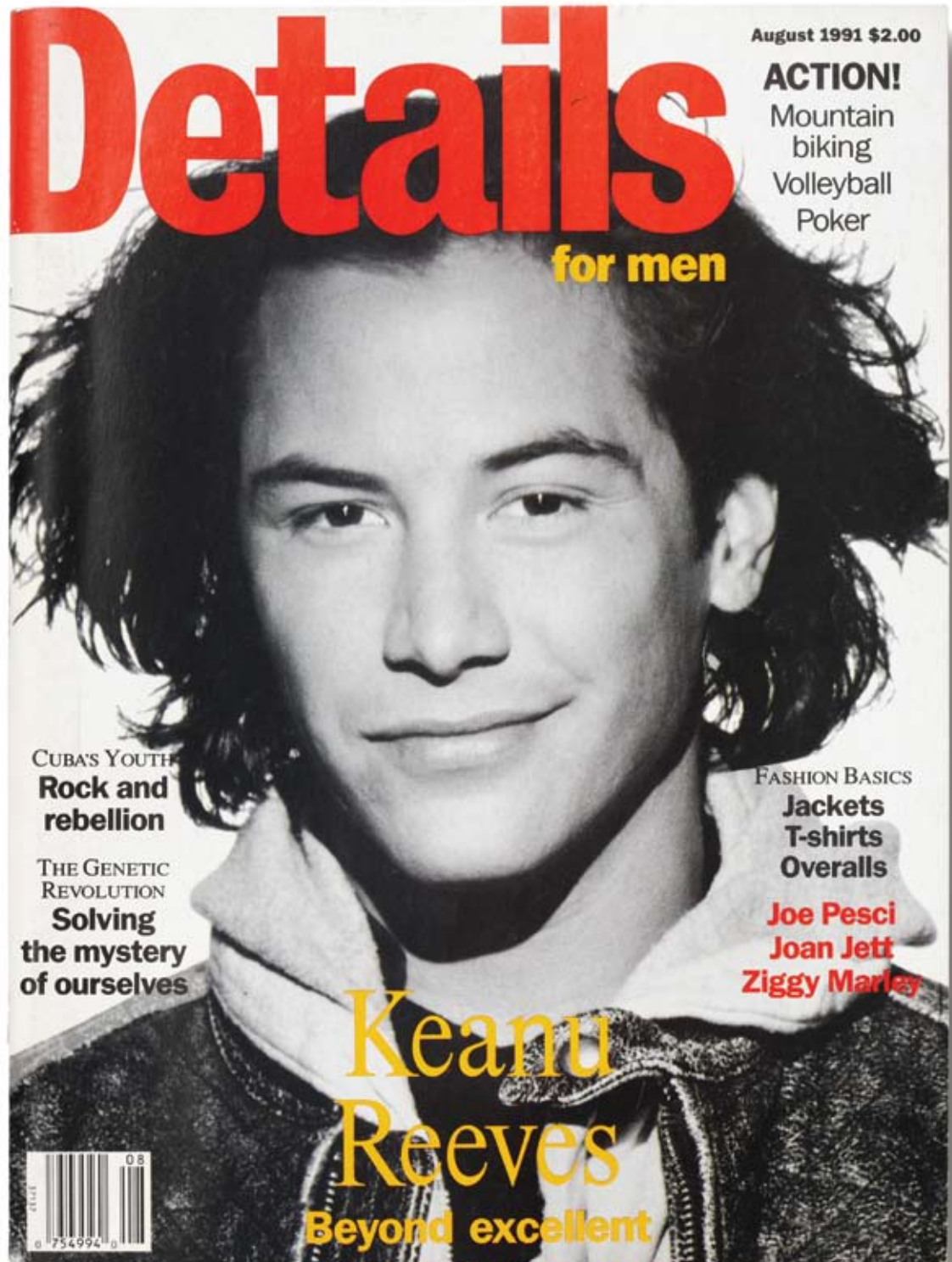
I've become close friends with Malcolm McLaren, who managed the Sex Pistols. He concedes that what was wrong with punk rock was that it had no sex in it; that people didn't go out to meet romantic partners; they went out to offload aggression and that was not a sustainable model. So in reaction to that, I think this notion of style and glamour emerged.

Before that, people who were interested in rock and roll didn't read *Vogue*. They weren't interested in it; it belonged to the cloistered world of Paris. Street fashion, at which London had always been so marvelous, had no media to explain it, even if sometimes high-end designers would come and see girls in miniskirts in the East End and be inspired to create couture.

The Face understood that the street was glamorous, that the street wasn't just sort of angry, and dirty, and punk. In turn, the rise of that magazine started to make the conventional fashion magazines like *Vogue* suddenly start paying attention to the street. There had been a little bit of that with [supermodel] Twiggy because she's from the East End, but it was really all about pulling things off the street, putting them through the sort of glossy process, and then coming out the other end with a \$1,000 dress.

In its own way, punk rock was fantastically glamorous. I remember seeing Malcolm and Johnny Rotten on Shaftesbury Avenue one day, before I knew either of them. I mean you'd never seen anything like it. They were wearing clothes that were ripped, but so beautifully organized and so beautifully designed. Vivienne Westwood had designed them. Cars were stopping and people were forming crowds around them. You saw that for them that was part of the arsenal, that you could shock and awe with the use of style.

Before *The Face* you could divide magazines by gender. The boys read grungy, poorly designed magazines printed on newsprint, with long tracts trying to explain the meaning behind the music, while the girls read fan magazines, with glossy pictures of the musicians. *The Face* brought girls and boys back together by making a glamorous magazine about music that featured fashion. Condé Nast noticed *The Face* and realized that it had something that they needed, and so they made an ownership investment. Those who had occupied the upper ranks of "Glossidom" accepted the underground world as potentially good business, bringing the street and the penthouse together during the eighties and nineties in publishing.



← Details magazine cover featuring Keanu Reeves, August 1991 photo by Nicolas Zurcher

In 1990 James was made editor in chief of *Details* magazine. He remembers clearly the moment when the inspiration for the new design approach for the magazine came to him. He was in Pasadena, California, standing outside the Rose Bowl as the audience arrived for a concert by Depeche Mode. He had been expecting backstage passes, but they never came through, and he didn't have enough cash for the scalper tickets that were going for hundreds of dollars because the concert was sold out, so he just had to stand outside.

Depeche Mode was a weedy group from Essex who had sold out the biggest concert arena in America. I had this experience of watching people come in, and I'd never seen an audience like that in America. It was very gay, and it was very straight. It was very masculine; it was very feminine. It was very fashionable, but it was very street. And I felt this ... it was like the first time I'd gone to see the Sex Pistols; you felt something was fermenting that was different and rich. It had at its heart a sense of style, but it was also fighting for a certain kind of social freedom, because there were a lot of Hispanics, a lot of Mexicans there, and there were a lot of white preppy kids as well. I felt that something was cooking; there was some congregation around this foreign group, who represented the beginnings of a Goth idea, certain style sensibilities, a certain kind of film noir quality, and that became my idea of what I thought the audience of *Details* should be.

It was the first magazine in America that ran stories about gay men and straight men alongside each other; we would have men together in fashion stories who were clearly not trying to be heterosexual. It was trying to broaden an idea of what a man was, and it was touching at the beginning of the technology boom. We had a lot of coverage of that. Then there was also psychological stuff about what it's like to be a man—what your relationships with your parents were like, what they mean to you. We were doing a magazine for sensitive young men who were not self-defined by their sexuality or by their class or actually by their ethnic origin. So it was kind of a rainbow magazine. Those magazines had existed but had always had a very small circulation, and the success of *Details* is that it went from being about 80,000 to 500,000 in a couple of years, so it had this explosive growth.



Japanese schoolgirls
photo courtesy of Wikimedia Creative Commons

That surge in circulation did not happen immediately. James had always been fascinated by the edginess of rebellious music and street fashion, and he may have brought too much of that for his American audience to the early issues of *Details*. The art direction started with a rather punk-derived design, but on glossy paper. There was a lot of in-your-face imagery and non-beautiful type, which looked quite aggressive. It nearly went out of business in the first year because people just hated it, proving that a certain amount of sugar coating or prettifying is needed in the United States to communicate ideas, even if the ideas themselves are neither pretty nor chic.

Putting Keanu Reeves on the cover rescued the venture. It was his first cover in America, and in spite of the fact that it was supposedly a men's magazine, the circulation doubled overnight; 100,000 teenage girls bought it because they liked Keanu. James realized afterward that the first design had expressed hostility to the audience, expecting it to be galvanizing and exciting. He learned something about the people he was designing for, both for their gender and for their attitudes toward aggression:

If you come at an American audience with a kind of “fuck you,” they’re going to turn around and say, “I’m not going to pay two dollars to read that.” I think it’s the same reason why the Sex Pistols never worked here; the performative aspect of hostility is something the English relish, but Americans take more literally and actually are put off by.

Teenage girls know about everything before anyone else does. It’s the same in Tokyo, it’s the same in London, the same in New York. When I was at *Wired* we had this Japanese Schoolgirl Watch, which was what was going on in the streets of Tokyo, with the understanding that this was the best barometer you could possibly have of what was going to be happening in the USA in a year. We’d go and photograph, interview girls on the street in Tokyo and find out what they were thinking about.

Women have conversations. They say what they like. They share what they like. I mean, they are communicators, but men are monkish, and private, and fearful around a lot of things that really interest them.

We really shifted the design, which was an interesting lesson about design because design is not morally right or wrong. If it can communicate an idea to a larger number of people without spoiling the idea, then I think it’s good design.

Details continued to be successful, reveling in the new mix of content that James had envisaged intuitively as he watched the audience in Pasadena. One month there was a ten-page feature on the biggest S&M parlor in New York, and the next month the first interview Carlos Castaneda had done in twenty years. It was a wildly eclectic offering, and perhaps the last time magazines had that freedom, as they got more and more reined in by competition among themselves and by the bigger voice that advertisers came to have in content. Magazines had been an adventurous and exploratory medium, but the mix of competition and the Internet forced them to become vehicles for serving the needs of advertisers.

In the seventies and eighties, the best graphic designers were cutting their teeth in magazines and would then go on to do other things, but as magazines started to become a little too static, a little too polished,

and a little too bland for the really bright young talents, they chose product design or Web design instead. The downturn of 2008 caused drastic reductions in advertising budgets across most industries, impacting almost all magazines. Automobile or luxury goods manufacturers are much less likely to buy full-page ads in magazines in a recession, particularly as they can target their limited advertising budgets much more successfully on the Internet. Google has made media accountable for the effectiveness of advertising. Nielsen's ratings on TV give some indications, but magazines rely on blind trust. Information is available about the number of people who see an ad, but nothing is known about whether they acted on it, whereas Google can track actions in detail. James believes that there has to be a new model or a new technology of advertising that can satisfy advertisers and also keep the well-known brand names afloat, as they are not willing to pay comparable amounts to advertise on the Web:

Banner ads haven't done it. Click-throughs haven't done it. I don't know what it's going to be, but whoever thinks it up is going to save an industry, because the model as it is now doesn't work. It's not complicated; it's just a question of real estate. How much real estate can you give on a Web page to an advertiser versus how much can you give in a magazine or newspaper? What happened, which was so unique with the Web, was that at the beginning the point of entry was so cheap; so much came online that didn't need advertising support that we aesthetically grew used to a vision of what a Web page should look like. If you put up a Web page that was seven-eighths advertisement, you wouldn't make it. People wouldn't stay with you, even though they had been acclimatized to accepting that in magazines and newspapers.

When James was given responsibility for overseeing all of the magazines published by Condé Nast, it was *Wired* that seemed distinct from the others. *Wired* was founded in 1993, early in the days of the surge of growth of the Internet. It showed that the technology of Silicon Valley was not just for nerds; it could appeal to everyone, offering a new sort of glossy excitement about all things digital. When Condé Nast bought

the magazine, it was unable to include the Web site, because it was separately owned. The Web was using some content from the magazine, but without editorial control. James credits Chris Anderson, the current editor in chief, for keeping the magazine afloat after the dot-com crash, and bringing the Web and paper versions together.

Wired was lucky in that it was in San Francisco instead of New York. There was a lot of talk about moving it to New York, but I think it would have essentially done in the magazine, done in its originality. I think it being in its own culture and being 3,000 miles away is vital. The head of Condé Nast saw that, too, and it was very smart of him to say, "It makes cost sense to move it to New York, but it makes no other sense. It stays in San Francisco." *Wired* was fantastically successful, then it was an absolute disaster after the bust of the dot-com boom, and now it's come back largely because Chris has done such a good job.

NEXT WE TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT WIRED MAGAZINE in an interview with Chris Anderson. Chris is confident that the magazine format is here to stay, as long as it makes the most of the unique attributes of magazine design, energetically pursuing luscious images, diagrams, and illustrations, with dramatic layout and rich production values. He feels the ambivalence of working to create a magazine that is owned by Condé Nast and writing books that are distributed by Disney, while in his heart he wants to celebrate the possibilities offered by the Internet to serve individual needs and desires in niches of focused interest. He believes that the print side of *Wired* should strive to add value to the Web, while the Web serves the endless expanse of amateur interests, even as it relies on the printed magazine to pay the bills.

CHRIS ANDERSON

Interviewed November 17, 2008



← Chris Anderson
photos by author

CHRIS ANDERSON

When *Wired* was first published in 1993, Chris was working at the scientific journal *Science*, expecting that the Internet would continue to be used solely for communications within the scientific community. Reading this bold and glossy magazine full of ideas about the way this technology would change the world made him realize that “this thing is a lot bigger than I thought,” and he knew immediately that his career was going to be related to the Internet forever more. He spent the subsequent seven years with *The Economist* magazine in various editorial roles and was responsible for launching its coverage of the Internet. In 2001 he was approached by Condé Nast and asked to take over as editor in chief at *Wired*, a daunting task, as the magazine was reeling after the dot-com crash. He succeeded in resuscitating *Wired* as a magazine and it has been thriving since. Chris coined the phrase “the long tail” in an acclaimed *Wired* article, which he expanded into book form². His 2009 book *Free: The Future of a Radical Price* examines the rise of pricing models that give products and services to customers for free.

² *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

The *Wired* magazine offices are located in San Francisco, on the third floor of a rectilinear brick building, crisscrossed with steel reinforcements against earthquakes. Gene Celso and I set up the cameras for the interview in front of the metal-framed windows of Chris's office. As he walked in, he was already ranting against overused words, with "media" being his first complaint:

I think media is an expired word. I don't know what it means. It's a word that maybe once had meaning but that meaning has been fuzzied to the point that it means everything and as a result nothing today. I think in the twentieth century media meant something pretty crisp until Marshall McLuhan came and screwed it all up. Today I have no idea what media means.

A little worried that the title of this book was vanishing down the drain, I reminded Chris that McLuhan had been extensively quoted in *Wired* magazine.

When I took over at Wired, Marshall McLuhan was the patron saint of the magazine, with a quote printed every month. At a certain point, about a year into my tenure, as I was rethinking things we do, it so happened that we'd run out of quotes from our McLuhan database and we were going to recycle them. I decided to take the opportunity to actually read these quotes and ask myself whether we wanted to do it. When I read them, I realized that not a single one stood up to scrutiny, for example, "The medium is the message." If it does mean anything, then unfortunately the word media doesn't mean anything I understand anymore, so I killed the quotes.

This critical approach to semantics is one of the attributes that makes Chris such an effective leader in his role as editor in chief.



← First edition of *Wired*, March 1993
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

WIRED MAGAZINE

Wired was founded in 1993 by American journalist Louis Rossetto and his partner Jane Metcalfe and edited by Kevin Kelly. The magazine and accompanying Web site were immediately successful, with the print version intermingling fluorescent DayGlo colors with striking images and typography. The bold vision won *Wired* awards for both content and design in its first four years, showing that the Internet was not just for scientists but would change the world for everybody. The publication evolved alongside the host of new companies springing up in San Francisco during the dot-com boom.

Then various busts came. IPOs failed, the dot-com crash decimated the industry, and the magazine split with its Web site, HotWired, which was bought by Lycos and turned into an archive. The magazine went to Condé Nast. In 2001 James Truman invited Chris Anderson to take over as editor in chief.

I really had never had a media job before. *The Economist* is more of a think tank, and Condé Nast is largely a fashion company. I'm the geekiest guy by far in an otherwise very cool company.

The stock market crashed in 2001, and what with September 11, Enron, et cetera, it was a real challenge to figure out what to do. We decided that there are really two questions: One, this story about the power of the Internet to change the world and technology—is this a mirage? Is this a fraud? Was dot-com just a bubble? Is it tulips? I knew in every fiber of my being that it was not, that we were at the beginning of something, not the end. The dot-com bubble was all about the stock market, not about the underlying technologies. The second real question is, What should we do about that? What should this magazine be? Even if I was right and the

revolution was won, what do revolutionaries do when they've won? Become counter-revolutionaries? Become the establishment figures? Sulk about the lost days of the long march?

So I decided that we would declare victory and join the establishment, if you will, be as revolutionary as possible within the establishment, but basically take the magazine mainstream. After a year and a half of flailing, we got traction. I was right. Everyone acknowledges that the Internet is here to stay, technology is now mainstream, it does empower individuals to change the world. No problem there.

We still want to blow minds twelve times a year, but that isn't so hard, because we're not really about technology; we're about how technology is changing the world. All we have to do is look out there somewhere. Technology is changing the world somewhere everyday, so the story is very broad and lots of fun. Two years ago we bought back the Web site, and we can now walk the talk and do the kind of experiments we've been advocating, but like everybody else, we are groping in the dark.

Chris believes that the acts of journalism, editing, and distribution are here to stay, but that the forms that are designed to contain the contents will vary to fit the vehicle. A magazine is largely a visual medium, whereas the Web is largely verbal. *Wired* has 8,000-word stories with lavish photography and design on high-resolution page spreads. On the Web, a story of this scale turns into sixteen pages of text, the photographs lose their richness, and the design is lost.

Our job on the print side is to add value to the Web. I think everybody's job in the information world, regardless of the industry, is to add value to the Web. The Web is the water we swim in, the air that we breathe—you need to stand out. So we do something the Web can't do. So now we come to the Web site. What should the Web site be? Well, it shouldn't just be a bad version of what we do in print. It should be something else. We have limited pages in the magazine and unlimited pages on the Web, but the cost structure is not right, because we're competing with amateurs who are creating an infinite amount of content on very narrow subjects for free.

Our challenge really is how to bring amateur energy into our domain. How do we use our brand, our kind of catalytic power, our leadership and our technology to incentivize people to create valuable content within our confines? You know, we have Reddit, which is like Digg, a user news-submission-andvoting mechanism. We have wikis, we have blogs, we have user-generated Flickr sets. We do it all. Some things work, most things don't – that's the normal way of things.

The magazine itself is not going to change. We'll continue to innovate, but I think *Wired* will look like *Wired* magazine for decades to come.

There are aspects to the magazine that may seem like virtues, but can also be seen as sins. It's got intrinsic hierarchy; it's got a cover; the stories have an order; the table of contents lists them in order. I have to guess every month at what the most important story is. I have to guess at how we're going to place our weight. I have to decide what the reader's path will be through the magazine. And every month, I'm wrong, sometimes a lot and sometimes a little, but the reason I know I'm wrong is because when I look at the actual user behavior on the Web, it's never what I expected. What I thought was going to be the most popular story is often not the most popular story on the Web, and what I thought was not going to be the most popular story turns out to be a popular story. I hate having to guess, but I have to because we build the thing before we ship it, and once it's shipped we can't change it.

Chris is disarmingly modest in blaming himself for errors of judgment, given the number of people who want to know what he thinks, no matter how often or rarely he may be wrong. They value his selection of the most important stories. He is interesting and provocative even when he is not accurate. There is room still in the virtual world of the Web for editorial authority. The skills of editing are timeless. People are interested in the opinions of a good editor, expert, or curator, whether online or in print, without presuming that it has to be right, but believing that the opinions matter enough to compensate for the errors.



FREE

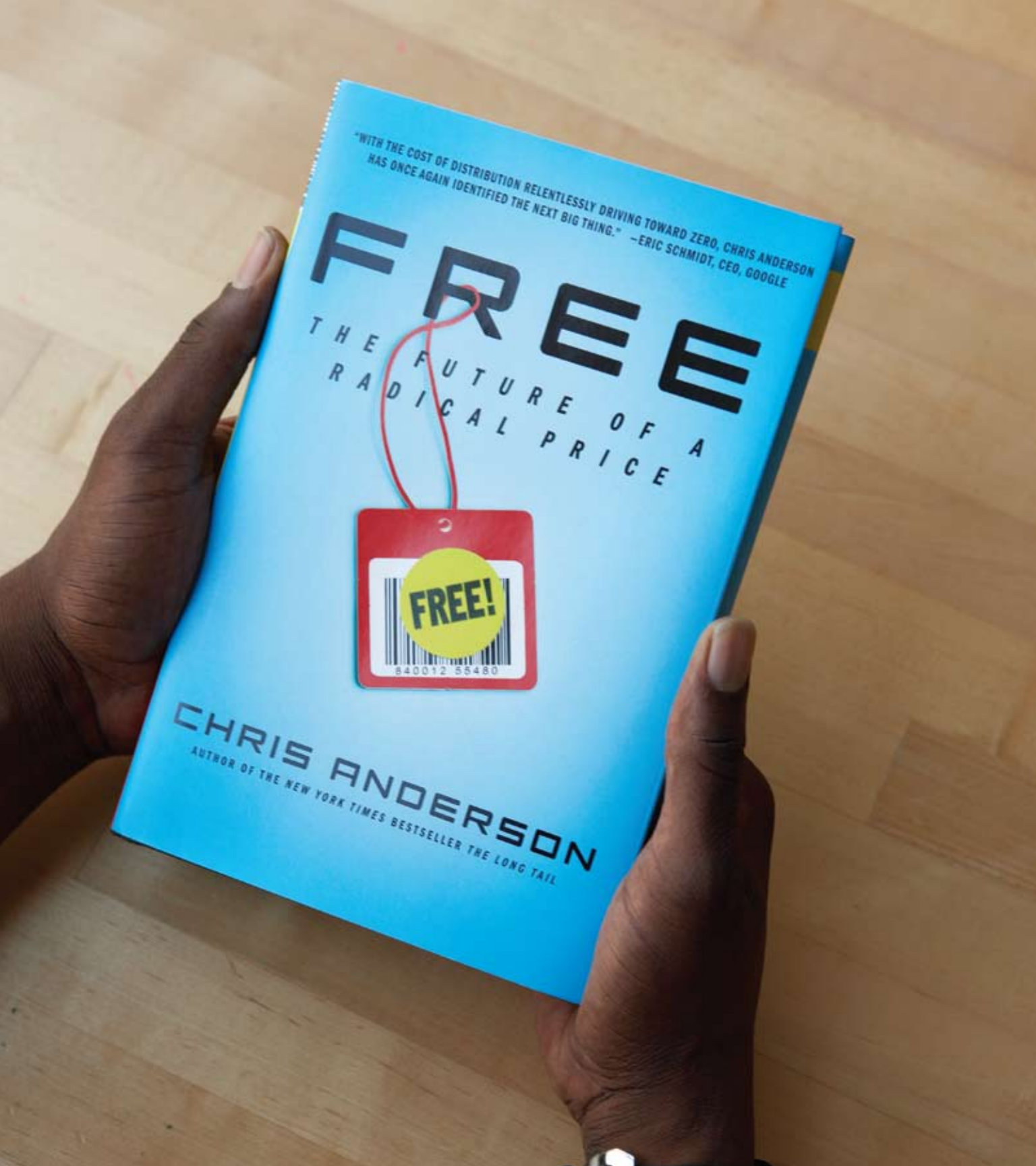
Chris wrote a groundbreaking article titled “The Long Tail” for the magazine and later found time and energy to convert it into a book. His next book, *Free: The Future of a Radical Price*, was written during 2008 and launched soon after this interview. He is sensitive to the irony of the clash between his content and the traditional medium of book publishing.

There are many ironies in my life. One of them is having coined the term *long tail* and described the phenomenon, as it has become our worst enemy, because we are the short head. I work for Condé Nast, one of America’s biggest magazine publishers, and my book is published by Disney. I’m in the blockbuster business by day, and by night I celebrate the rise of the niche. I’m in a mass, top-down, one-to-many business, which pays my rent. And yet what excites me is just the opposite.

Many people misunderstand the lessons of “The Long Tail,” assuming that it’s the end of the blockbuster. It is very much not. Instead, it is the end of the monopoly of the blockbuster. The way I think about it from our perch in a skyscraper at 4 Times Square (Condé Nast headquarters) is that we big-media companies, using the traditional definition, owned the twentieth century. We owned the tools of production. You could not compete with our ability to produce and distribute content. Our factories are indeed factories. They are three blocks long. They are printing plants; they are massive. Our distribution channels are trucks. Our retail space is newsstand space, which you cannot get access to—but we can. We were unbeatable. And so too for television and radio.

All those supply-chain advantages have disappeared in the online version of our world, where everybody has exactly the same access to the consumer as we do and the same tools of production. And as a result our tradition of competing—big companies competing with other big companies—is now big companies competing with a zillion amateurs. They can’t do

← Free by Chris Anderson
photo by Nicolas Zurcher



what we do. They can't do mass-market glossy publications on newsstands everywhere. But what they can do is what we can't do, which is to focus with laser precision on narrow topics for niche audiences who care more about their niche than anything we do in our publications. So this army of ants is a real challenge and, to move from my last book to my next book, they're doing it all for *free*.

Chris has walked his talk, making the book *Free* freely available in its digital form. He uses free as a form of marketing, believing that it is the best tool to sell something that is not free, even if only 1 percent of the people buy the superior, physical form. Access to the free version will only extend the reach of the physical book and increase sales. He believes in books—meaning paper books, with covers, that you put on your shelf. He thinks books are here to stay and will be with us for his entire life, but he does not believe that physical books are the only way to consume the written word. There are many digital forms of books: the audio book, listened to in a car while you're driving; eBooks, for example the Kindle from Amazon, Que from Plastic Logic, or the Sony Reader; or Google Book Search, with everything scanned, accessible from any of the screens that we use. The digital forms offer advantages in terms of use and price, but the superior form remains the traditional book—it is immersive, easy to read and carry, offers high-resolution images and an excellent contrast ratio. A paper book is a delight to look at and browse through, but the free digital forms are a really good way to introduce ideas to the broadest possible audience, so they can make an impact and spur a desire among some people to read the superior paper version.

Those who want more, those who value the attributes of the traditional book, can upgrade to the premium of the “freemium” equation and pay \$24.95 for the superior form. I think that's a small percent of a big number and a good model for books. I wish books were more designed. In the magazine industry, the reason why *Wired* magazine exists as a magazine is because we are a visual medium. If we were just 8,000 words of text, laid out in columns, I don't think we'd be in business. I wish books were more of a visual medium. I think that would preserve the book's specialness in the future.

Now comes the twenty-first century and we've got a new form of “free,” based around digital economics. The difference between the economy of atoms, which was the twentieth century and before, and the economy of bits, which is the twenty-first century and beyond, is that the marginal cost of bits is zero. It doesn't cost anything to send those bits out to one more person—or so close to nothing you might as well round down. If the actual cost for a product is zero, then the price can really be zero; it doesn't have to be a trick. Now you have the ability to have what we call “real free,” which is to say, get your products and services out there to as many people as possible. Let 95 percent of them take it for free, but find some way to offer a paid for version to the 5 percent who really want it and get the value.

This is the inversion of the old “free sample” model. If you're selling muffins, maybe you'll give away 1 percent of your muffins and sell 99 percent. In the digital world it's just the opposite: you give away 99 percent to sell 1 percent. And now free doesn't just become a marketing trick. It becomes the best way to introduce your product to the maximum number of people—not in a marketing form, but in an actual sample form, so that they can self-identify as the customers who really want it.



← Lego NXT robotics
image courtesy of Lego

VOTES

Many people think of Wikipedia as democratic compared with *Encyclopædia Britannica*, but Chris thinks that is misleading: the significant difference is between credentialed and uncredentialed. You can look up the credentials of the editors and experts who contributed to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, but you can't do that for Wikipedia. In the past, if you wanted to make television, you needed to be in the television industry to have access to the channels of distribution. Now anyone who buys a video camera and some software for their laptop can make television. You browse YouTube and discover millions of anonymous video makers, whose efforts are structured by millions of popularity contests. Those of us who grew up in the twentieth century make an instinctive assumption that there is one popularity contest—one top forty, one prime time—the new reality is that there are millions.

The videos that Chris watches are never going to make the front page of YouTube, because he is passionate about Lego robotics videos, a narrow niche, but still one that has enough material to need a hierarchy of votes to bring the most popular ones to the top. People care in two dimensions. They want to find material that has been filtered to satisfy their own niche interests, but they are also interested in the hits that have universal appeal, even if they tend to deliver content that is only superficially entertaining.

All the successes of Web-based interactive media rely on counting votes. Traditional media had no good way to measure the back channel, to say, "Here's what we're doing. What do you think?" Instruments like Nielsen ratings, polls, and surveys are really coarse, yielding little information about what people actually think. Interactive media make it really easy for people to express what they think, both in terms of what they say and what they do, which produces data that is easy to act on with a greater level of confidence in the results. Producers of content can stop guessing now; they can just measure.

Chris makes connections between many different kinds of emerging media companies based on the fact that they rely on votes:

Google is an algorithm, yes, but it's an algorithm that's measuring human votes. That's what a link is: a link is a vote. Is there really a big difference between a Digg vote, a link vote, and a Wikipedia revert? I mean, they're all really votes. What their computers are doing is reading our collective opinions and then structuring the content around this latent information that was there all along, just not measurable. I think they all fall into the same category. They are markets of opinion, and we can measure those because they are substantiated in digital acts, and we use algorithms to parse them, rank them, and otherwise chop and channel them—to structure information in a way that's meaningful.

Google competes with media companies not just for advertising but also for attention. Google doesn't create content—it organizes other people's content. The reality is that we're competing for attention. We're all competing for attention. Google is competing for attention in a different way than we're competing for attention. We're all competing for reputation, as well, and by reputation I don't just mean page rank and incoming links, but brand, Q ratings, celebrity, all these kinds of things. The meaningful metrics are reputation and attention. Media have probably always implicitly had reputation and attention built in.

People care about reputation and attention, but they also care more about connecting to one another socially than they do about connecting to hierarchical structures or abstracted organizations. Social media are emerging as the fastest growing segment on the Web, as one-to-one communication is more important in people's daily lives than any other form of communication. Voting is useful in helping people find one another and compare notes about their common interests, but they can bypass the votes when they are communicating directly. The big change is not about the desire to connect socially—that is here to stay. Rather, it's the *scale* of connectivity that is changing, increasing drastically as technology enables it. The natural tribal size used to be around 120 people, but that number is much larger now and growing all the time:

We've gone from a small number of tight relationships to a large number of loose relationships. We're seeing a generational change. We're actually rewiring our species on some level. My capacity to multitask is less than my children's, and it doesn't just reflect their age. We are training a generation to consume information in a massively parallel way, and they are going to retain those skills forevermore. I think likewise, we're training a generation to build their social network differently than we did. Their ability to maintain many loose connections is something technology is only just now allowing.

I'm not really interested in the companies, and I'm not interested in the technologies. I'm interested in the collective experiment and figuring out how it is we want to engage with each other online. That's the social part, and we do it using whatever technology happens to be available at the moment—and those change over time. What people do on Facebook is interesting, but I don't think Facebook the company is as interesting. Not that I think anything bad about the company—I just think that ten years from now we'll be doing something else. MySpace, likewise. As yet, we have not figured out what the optimal form of this communication is, as we dash from Twitter, to FriendFeed, to whatever. They're just experiments in trying new things and seeing what sticks.

NEIL STEVENSON LAUNCHED A PERSONAL experiment in engaging with other people online. He started an anonymous weekly newsletter and Web site to publish scuttlebutt about the lives of celebrities, a venture that has stayed alive based on user-generated content. In the next interview he tells this story and also analyzes the consumption of various media. He contrasts “sitting back” to enjoy traditional media with “leaning forward” to engage with interactive content online. He describes some design rules for magazines and chronicles the emergence of reality television.

NEIL STEVENSON

Interviewed March 28, 2008



← Neil Steveson
photos by author

NEIL STEVENSON

After studying psychology and social anthropology at Oxford University, Neil gratified his passion for dance music and club culture by writing about DJs. Soon he became editor of the dance music magazine *Mixmag*. From there, he moved into more mainstream titles, helping to launch the weekly celebrity magazine *Heat*, and became editor in chief of the style magazine *The Face*. He became frustrated by the controls on publication of some of the most interesting stories, so he founded an underground email newsletter and Web site called Popbitch to distribute stories about celebrities that were contributed by amateur volunteers. In 2005 he joined IDEO and now leads the Kid+Play domain, a group focused on two distinct but overlapping content areas: children and play. His play projects include creating games for the Wii and the iPhone and developing ideas about how lessons learned from designing play can be applied to adult creativity and used to help companies become more innovative.

Neil brought a breath of fresh energy to IDEO when he joined us in 2005. He immediately delved into our history and discovered the backstory of our culture, assembling an amusing presentation about the history of the people behind the ideas that inform our process of human-centered design, rapid prototyping, brainstorming, and so on. I asked him for an interview as an early prototype in my own process of collecting material for this book, but I found his story so interesting that I ended up including it in the final material, recording it a second time for better quality, set in the San Francisco location of IDEO.



← The Pleasure of Magazines
photo by Getty/Thomas Northcut

MULTIPLE MEDIA

Media are like the big bang, in that the number of choices on offer seems to expand continuously and rapidly. The number of television channels is now counted in hundreds instead of single digits, never mind the quality of the content, and you can watch an infinite number of videos online, again of mixed merit. We've gone from having newspapers of a few pages to a few inches of paper thickness. There are more books and magazines being published today than ever before, despite the arrival of email, mobile phones, and the Internet. The old media are here to stay, but there has been an absolute explosion of choice in both old and new.

When the publishers of magazines came to realize that they could benefit from distribution online as well as in print, they hoped at first that there would be nothing but synergies between analog and digital. They had content that they could send down different pipelines—the print pipe, the Internet pipe, the mobile phone pipe—and they thought that the more pipes they sent it down, the more value they would gain. They were wrong. This dangerously simplistic view didn't take into account how people consumed each medium and what mode they were in. The art of creating content that is tuned for consumption in each medium tends to separate the versions, so that the material prepared for a glossy magazine—rich with images and elegant typography—will not fit well on a pixelated screen of limited size, be it a personal computer or a PDA. Neil contrasts “sitting back” with “leaning forward” in this fashion:

A lot of the pleasure of magazines is like taking a warm bath. You sit back, you open this beautiful thing, and you flip through it and luxuriate in all this color and energy. For a lot of titles, like *Vogue*, the differentiation between the editorial and the advertising doesn't register because you're getting these

beautiful images. It's just generally inspiring. Now, that's very different from being on the computer and wanting to go to a specific Web site. You have a specific goal in mind. You want to find out about something. You're "leaning forward" and accessing something. You're not going to lean forward and say that you want to look at a Prada advert. That's just not how you behave. I don't believe that you have the sense of time and broadmindedness to wallow in a picture when you're on a computer in that lean-forward mode. You tend to be after a piece of information.

All attempts to send the same content down these different pipes are utterly doomed. The magazines that have done well have optimized their content over a long period of time to deliver exactly the right magazine experience, which means that it is exactly wrong for these other media.

If you put people in a focus group and ask them, "Would you like more choice?" the answer is always an enthusiastic "Yes!" but it doesn't necessarily make them any happier. The explosion of choice in media has led to some odd behaviors. With TV shows, a lot of attention is paid to the name of the show, because it has to attract the viewer who is browsing an electronic programming guide with a sentence that is short enough to fit in the box on the screen and is succinctly descriptive. Hence we get, *When Good Pets Go Bad* and *The World's Funniest Animals*. The name needs to explain exactly what it is, leading to the death of nuance or ambiguity. The fear that people will leave also drives the design of material that is immediately obvious and gratifying but tries not to let people escape. You don't want to annoy people—otherwise they'll change channels, given the number of options just a few seconds away. You therefore try to avoid giving offense. In order to succeed in this global, over-choiced media world, you find yourself designing things that everybody will kind of like and nobody will dislike with any passion. The common denominator of design expression sinks ever lower.

DESIGN RULES FOR MAGAZINES

The editors who put together the golden age of British magazines, with winners such as *Smash Hits*, *Q*, *Empire*, *The Face*, and *FHM*, developed rules of thumb for design decisions based on their ability to capture the emotional drivers toward purchase. They had built up a body of knowledge by prototyping and repeated testing. Every month they put out a magazine and the sales figures would give them feedback about the level of success, so they would argue with one another about which elements were influential and arrive at a consensus about what had worked and what hadn't, leading to rules of thumb. Neil loved to engage with all these very fuzzy emotional attributes that attracted people.

Always have eye contact on the cover, because going into a newsagent is like walking into a cocktail party—you want to make eye contact with someone, and they need to be someone you are intrigued by. That's the person you'll go over and have a conversation with, and the conversation will be reading the headlines on the cover.

We'd get in these conversations about why Catherine Zeta-Jones would sell bucket-loads of women's magazines, whereas Cameron Diaz would not sell very well at all. Catherine Zeta-Jones, Cameron Diaz, both beautiful, successful actresses, both equally famous—why should one sell and not the other? And they would say that for the women's market, the magazine worked as a kind of idealized mirror: the readers would look at the cover, and it was as if the person on the cover was them on the best possible day with a nice light and everything working out well. They could be Catherine Zeta-Jones, whereas Cameron Diaz was just too hot, too blond, too perfect—that would never be them.



Catherine Zeta-Jones and Cameron Diaz
photos by Nicolas Zurcher



Some of the rules were quite distressing. The sad fact in Britain was that, even in this very racially tolerant society, with a lot of black people being aspirational celebrity figures for youth culture, if you put a black person on a magazine cover, it wouldn't sell as well. The way the editors talked about it was not in terms of absolute theories, nor psychological explanations as to why Naomi Campbell wouldn't sell. It was like "spook magic." This is the myth. Occasionally someone would come along and have a success despite breaking some of those rules.

The original purpose of those magazines was to deliver the secrets of the cosmopolitan elite to people living in provincial towns and to let the people living in the cities have listings of what DJs were playing at what clubs. Both of those values started to erode as the Internet became popular, as the secrets about a Finnish techno record or obscure Adidas trainer became available in greater detail at a specialist Web site—and every club had a Web site with listings and links to the DJs' Web sites. The magazines that had started as the hip voice of the streets had also been subverted by commerce, as they had attracted the attention of Italian, French, and American fashion labels wanting to buy into

this edgy culture. A Faustian bargain had emerged: the magazines had taken their money, but now the owners of the labels needed to have plenty of photographs of expensive fashion, even though they also wanted the authentic voice of British street culture. Neil thinks that the magazines were caught in an untenable position.

In British culture, and possibly in American as well, there had been through the nineties an almost a binary culture. In the mainstream, people went to normal shops and bought normal clothes and records and listened to what was on the radio. Then there was "the underground." Even though the underground segmented into these broad tribes—of Goths, ravers, punks, and so forth—there was still coherence to it. You were either mainstream or underground, or alternative, if you like. If you were alternative, you would buy a magazine like *The Face*. If you were mainstream, you'd buy mass-market newspapers.

When the Internet arrived, it splintered the underground into an almost infinite number of tiny cells of passionate interest. If you were into weird Argentinean dub techno that sounded like someone had dropped a computer down a flight of stairs, there would be a Web site for you and a whole community of people you could connect with across multiple geographies. There was not longer a coherent underground but a mass of tiny, little undergrounds.

Culturally curious people no longer defined their set of tastes by being underground. Instead, something more like a mosaic was happening, where an individual would say, "I am into this particular form of arty music, this particular form of underground cinema, but I also like Justin Timberlake and Kylie Minogue, and I actually really like that blockbuster movie, and I will assemble myself a unique mosaic of both niche, obscure things and mainstream things." By having that mosaic, they asserted individuality and transcended the marketing men who attempted to put them in a box.



The Spice Girls
photo by AP Images

REALITY TV

In 1990s Britain there was a broad aspiration in society to become famous, causing people to identify with celebrities who seemed ordinary. The Spice Girls embodied that. They were a group of “girls next door” who had become famous. That’s what was so attractive about them. The creators of media were suddenly made aware of the value of letting people identify themselves with the stars, and they developed a new type of celebrity journalism to attract those with aspirations to become famous themselves. This trend culminated with reality TV. Neil points out that there was some idealism driving this movement as well, as many people working in television thought that there was a moral good in appealing to a broader audience—a freshly democratic media:

Television in the past had been dominated by people educated at the best universities, who attempted to foist their own points of view on people with uplifting television shows that were actually arrogant forms of paternalism. Instead, all of these clever people started to make shows like *Big Brother*, creating reality TV. They devoted a lot of intellectual energy to creating the formats and told themselves that what they were doing was morally good because it was democratic. They were allegedly reflecting the will of the people.

Some think that is a delusion and that what really happened is that big business won, that all these clever people making reality shows actually were just serving the needs of big business, and that television has lost its diversity and lost what made it uplifting and interesting to people. You could certainly see really clever people making a lot of really trashy TV. Britain has become the source of almost all the reality TV formats that have become big around the world. Whether it be *Wife Swap* or *Pop Idol* (*American Idol* in the United States) or *Big Brother*, they all came out of Britain. It’s kind of scary!

The change is toward format innovation rather than content innovation. For a drama, you have a well-known three-act structure, with some room for variation, but it’s an accepted format so that people can exercise their creativity within it. For reality TV, you don’t have to describe the content, you just have to say, “This is a format where a hundred women compete to be chosen to marry one guy.” You can describe it on the back of a napkin in a trendy media bistro in Soho after a couple of glasses of wine and a line of cocaine, and your job’s done. You can sell the format, someone else makes the show, and you can sell the overseas rights, so it works well with the globalization of TV media.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

As Neil was working with magazines in London in the late 1990s, he gradually became more frustrated with the limitations imposed by the public relations agents of celebrities, finding that time and time again he would have access to wonderful stories but not be allowed to print them. His writing career had started with fanzines, in which you just wrote what you cared about, but now he was being controlled. As a cathartic response to these restrictions, he and his girlfriend, Camilla Wright, decided to start an anonymous weekly email and Web site called Popbitch, containing all the stories that they weren't allowed to print. They sent it to people in the music industry, with an option to sign up, and it soon became remarkably successful, with a thousand subscribers after six months of operation growing to six hundred thousand in three years.

What we got was an early experience of user-generated content. Stories started coming in from receptionists who worked at record labels, hairdressers, makeup people, and so on. My initial set of stories was quickly exhausted, but new ones came in. The email and Web site caught the imagination of people in the industry and sustained itself. Eventually there were enough new stories coming in that I couldn't handle the volume, so with the help of a volunteer, I built a primitive message board on the Web site, and suddenly people could have conversations with each other. Certain people were very active on the board, so I made them into editors and added software where they could flag any interesting stuff. At the end of each week, we could harvest all the best stories and that made the email.

I was working at the time for a magazine that spent £10 million a year to produce itself, with a staff of fifty working away feverishly. In the evenings I'd go home, and me and my girlfriend would collect a few emails off the Web site. In terms of the hard celebrity news we published and the reaction it got, the £50-a-month Web site was outperforming the £10-million-a-year magazine, because there were enough people scattered

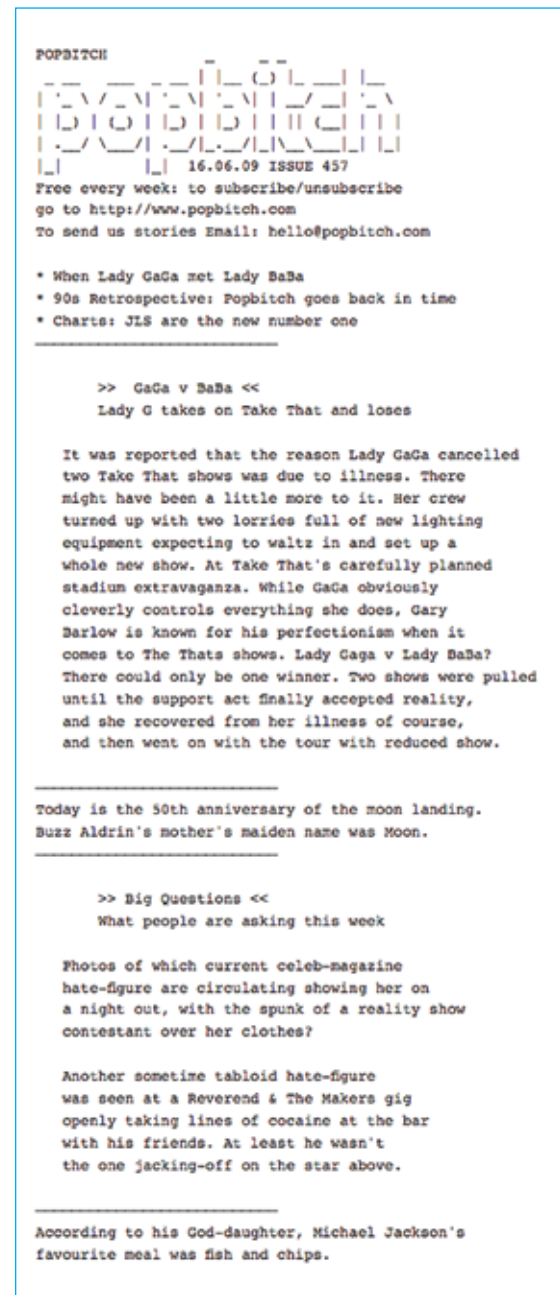
around the country sending fresh stuff in for free. The distributed network of idealistic amateurs was defeating the room full of professional journalists. It was a very exciting period.

The design was aggressively all text. The Web site itself, even the logo, was done with ASCII art. It was deliberately done to be as gritty and as cheap-looking as possible. With celebrity journalism in Britain, if you are in possession of a saucy story about the Spice Girls, you can go to a tabloid newspaper and sell it and make a significant amount of money. For this Web site to get people to give stuff for free, it was very important we made it clear we were an amateur operation. We deliberately designed it to look like a bedroom operation that was being done for love, not money.

We got famously sued by several of the Spice Girls, David Beckham, and people like that. It became quite notorious for a while after we were outed in the *Daily Mirror*. The legal challenges would evaporate once the lawyers saw a list of assets, consisting of a few unsold T-shirts and an old laptop.

This version of user-generated content has something in common with Wikipedia. If you want people to donate their own time to writing, editing, and overseeing something in this way, it won't work if you are coining it. If you're a big-media brand, people will feel like they are slaving away for you and your shareholders. Neil compares Wikipedia to Popbitch:

Wikipedia doesn't make money. It doesn't carry advertising. It survives through donations, and I believe that is not a coincidence. I think if Wikipedia was owned



Popbitch screenshot

by Time Warner and had loads of ads round it, those people would go away, because otherwise they would feel cheated. If you're working for nothing and someone else is making money, it won't work.

That's the problem with these user-generated content models. If you're trying to collectively build something together, then the owner can't get rich off of it. It's a bit different with YouTube, as that's just a venue. It's just a bucket in which people can throw their stuff. But for Wikipedia, where there is a collective body of knowledge with its own voice, you can't expect everyone to jump aboard and do the work unless you are prepared to do the whole thing pro bono.

I experienced this with Popbitch. People will do remarkable amounts just for kudos, for a form of celebrity. For example, with Wikipedia, "I have written the entry on Napoleon Bonaparte, and it's mine, and I feel good. Within the Wikipedia community, it's recognized as a good piece of work." With Popbitch I had a bunch of people who were editors, not paid, but they had a high status. They could approve other people's messages, so if some bitter makeup artist from Los Angeles posted an interesting story about Christina Aguilera's terrible behavior, one of these editors would flag that as interesting. That person would receive points, and if they posted repeatedly interesting stories, those points would express themselves in tiny little icons that appeared next to their name. Within the community, they conferred status, and that was enough to keep people motivated. They were essentially getting badges for how knowledgeable or how insidery they were. Those things had social value within the community.

PAUL MILLER, AKA DJ SPOOKY: THAT SUBLIMINAL KID, operates fluently in multiple media, as music composer and producer, DJ, artist, writer, and impresario. In the final interview of this chapter, he talks about the new order of creative commons and shareware, which, he argues, is here to stay.

PAUL D. MILLER, AKA DJ SPOOKY

Interviewed October 21, 2009



PAUL D. MILLER, AKA DJ SPOOKY

Paul is a composer, multimedia artist, and writer who travels extensively to perform and give presentations. His writing has appeared in *The Village Voice*, *The Source*, *Artforum*, and *The Wire*, among other publications. His art has been shown in the Whitney Biennial; the Venice Biennale of Architecture; the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany; Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna) in Austria; The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and many other museums and galleries. His work *New York Is Now* was exhibited in the African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale and at the 2007 Art Basel Miami Beach Fair. The MIT Press published *Rhythm Science*, his first collection of essays, in 2004, and *Sound Unbound*, an anthology of writings on electronic music and digital media, in 2008. Paul's deep interest in reggae and dub music has resulted in a series of compilations, remixes, and collections of material from the vaults of the legendary Jamaican label Trojan Records. The DJ Spooky/DJ Mixer iPhone app has been downloaded more than 1 million times.

← DJ Spooky
photos by author

I met DJ Spooky at the Indaba conference in Cape Town, South Africa, where we were both presenting. At that time I thought of him as a DJ but discovered from browsing his Web site that he has a fluent command of media, with music, video, speech, social media, and online representation all contributing to the communication of his ideas. I immediately wanted to interview him for *Designing Media* but found it difficult to get in touch. Eventually I made contact through the people who manage his engagements and found out that he lives very close to the IDEO offices in New York. The next time I was in New York, we set up an interview in the IDEO studio.

Paul Miller may seem a less interesting name than DJ Spooky: That Subliminal Kid, but he makes up for it with his erudite conversation, informed by his background in philosophy and French literature and his experience in art and music. He speaks fluidly on many topics, constantly branching off in new directions of thought. Here, I've presented his interview as long quotations to reflect his style.

CREATIVE COMMONS ARE HERE TO STAY

With sound, I'm trying to open up the artist, like an open architecture operating system, and try and figure out ways to have people participate, but I just then guide the process. I'm the helmsman. I'm trying to figure out how do you walk on this liminal threshold, the razor's edge of creativity and individuality.

I do not feel emotionally connected to music once it's out of my brain. I think, "You know what, it's a file. Anyone can take that file and cut it, splice it, dice it, do whatever they want to it."

Let's look at it as biomimesis, like mirroring, camouflage, and the idea of the mimetic function. There's a really good book [by Michael Taussig] called *Mimesis and Alterity* [Routledge, 1993] that I always chuckle over. It's like saying, if anybody can be a mirror of anybody, you have a hall of mirrors, with two reflective surfaces facing one another, but there is no there, there. That's what is going on now with the creative process and art online. Everyone is mirroring everything. And the problem is, where do we find the unique and human moment out of that? Like, you know, the sublime: the experiences of centuries' worth of art. In fact, you don't. It's the death of the sublime.

The shareware model assigns value to this idea that the artist is an open system font almost, like you're a font that just lets people take that font and use it to modify their own material. "Datacloud aesthetics"—that's a better nickname for it. Things where you have access to it all the time, like water in an urban economy. If you think about electricity and water, those are public goods, part of the commons. But, if you want "good" water, you're going to pay a certain amount of money for it. You'll pay extra for bottled water, but if you want part of the commons you're just going to turn on the tap, and that's it.



← Good Water
photo by Nicolas Zurcher



Two of DJ Spooky's albums
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

The easiest thing to do is just rip it, mix it, burn it, and that's it: no one gets paid. You just do it for free, and you give it to your friends for free in an "informal economy." When I was in Beijing, I went by a couple of markets. They had bootlegs of everything from Chairman Mao's "[Little] Red Book" to the latest Madonna remix album.

People need to realize they are the creative person. Just because somebody buys a Shep Fairey "Obama Hope" poster or downloads one of my mixes doesn't make them me. It's like I'm a mask, or I am a font. And as soon as that idea, song, or image that I've come up with leaves my biological frame here, my skull, I have to say, "Whew, let's take a deep breath. People are going to run with it and do whatever they want." Now there's people out there in the world that will burst into flames over that idea because of the whole legal mechanism of centuries of copyright control, has just gone into entropy. But, you know, to be completely honest, that entropy is where the most creative stuff is going. I don't see it as something you can control.

I don't see it as something you can legislate in Congress. I don't see it as something that anybody out there in their right mind says that they can lock down. In fact, the illusiveness of it is what makes it interesting.

FROM VINYL TO DIGITAL

Paul's main interest is in layering multiple media in the dematerialized virtual world, but he is best known as a DJ. He is fascinated by the richness and emotional power of sound and music, our responses to acoustic environments from all kinds of sources, from cell phone rings and melodies to rhythmic relationships or motifs. These qualities are here to stay, even if the media of delivery are constantly changing. Everyone is wearing earbuds now, allowing them to always have their music with them. Paul contrasts this to previous media.

The interiority of the iPod and equivalent music players has really transformed the way that people listen. The iPod is less than a decade old, but it's changed everything in terms of people's consuming of music.

Let's look at the idea of the phonograph. If you're thinking about the idea of sound and interface, that's probably the most popularized image of how people think of recorded information. After a century of people living with what I like to call "the culture of the copy," you almost take access to music for granted. If everyone has the same records and access to the same memories of the records that are in vogue, then that's a social sculpture in its own right. It's people sharing and exchanging recorded memories—we could call it "the social life of information."

To me, records aren't dead media. What gives them a sense of social vitality is the exchange process and regeneration process. The notion of just pressing "play" on a phonograph, which happened for most of the twentieth century, has been flipped on its head by the playlist, allowing the consumer to participate in the process of distribution in a way that was never possible before. Nowadays everyone is their own radio station. We have our own specific data set of songs to relate to. There are list servers, Web sites, collating software, and collaborative filtering to help us choose: if you like this song, you'll like that.



← Vinyl
photo by Nicolas Zurcher

The DJ operates somewhere between selection and analysis of song and decoding things that people will relate to. If I'm at a party, I play a sequence of songs that I've sampled, edited, collaged, and spliced. The interface between the phonograph and the digital media file is this kind of selection process, with the vinyl record here to stay as a form of interface.

Vinyl will outlast the CD because it's got more value, both as an interface for the DJ to control speed and transitions, and allow sampling and scratching, but also as a collector's item. The CD is just a vessel for data, so if you can have the same files on a digital device that you would have on a CD, why do you want the CD at all?

When you think about an album, it's usually meant as a coherent full-length sequence, but if you go back to the beginning of the record industry in the 1920s, you had a 78 vinyl with only enough room for a single. Now, with digital media, we're going back to the single as we have the option to purchase one song at a time online.

So, what makes a song? Motif, a melody, a genomic function of rhythm's relationship to the bass line, the keyboards, all these things are still eerily like old school, but they're all transformative. When I was working on my new album, *The Secret Song*, the pun was that albums are totally, utterly obsolete, so I decided to think about it as a collection of disparate singles that somebody might be coasting through on Pandora.³ Given our recession and the kind of financial meltdown that happened in 2008, I was also looking at the intersection of politics and economics, and that led me to exotic forms of manipulation of currencies and toxic assets. I was trying to make an album that was about buyers and sellers.

In the twenty-first century, where's the Cold War except in the rearview mirror? We now have an economic tension based on globalization. For example, everything I'm wearing was made in China. The design might have happened in California, but

³ See the interview with Tim Westergren, the founder of Pandora Internet Radio, in chapter 2.

that idea, that little zip file, or whatever you want to call it, gets sent to a factory in Guangdong Province or one of the other provinces that make up the factory to the world. I kept wondering how a musician could express that intriguing sense of globalization? If I make a song and send it to China, what would happen? Imagine if you sent it the same way that people send the design for an iPhone, which gets components from Malaysia, engineered in Indonesia, and compiled in Hong Kong, and then shipped to California, where it gets a little stamp saying “Manufactured by Apple.”

The title track of *The Secret Song* exemplifies this globalization, with a sweetly feminine voice singing fragments of poetry about financial transactions in Mandarin. Paul also thought of expressing the new dematerialized world of music by throwing a Craigslist party, where everyone on certain lists would get components of the song, or putting an album’s components on eBay and having people bid for the elements of the music, like the beats or the bass line.

COMMENTARY

I don’t want to interrupt the flow of the stories in the interviews by stopping to discuss the ideas about designing media as they emerge from the narrative. Instead, I have added commentary at the end of each chapter to summarize and reflect on the significance of the ideas. I put the interview with Paul Saffo first because he gives an overview of the changes in media and the challenges faced by the people involved its creation and design.

Paul helps us understand the differences between traditional mass media and new personal media, contrasting characteristic differences. First is the nature of the experience. With mass media, we watch, but with personal media answering back is required, so we need to design the interactions for the participants, implying a tight feedback loop. Then there is the location. Mass media came into our living rooms, but we carry personal media with us everywhere we go, so we design for portability and mobile access. The nature of the dominant players has also changed. Mass media was the world of the few and the large, but the personal media world is dominated by the many and the small.

Saffo’s law is a useful design principle to help us understand the personal media world. Ask for a message of not over 140 characters, a search string, or just a click, and you can create successful personal media.

Paul reassures the producers of mainstream media by his statement that old forms of media never die out entirely but get repurposed for new uses, implying that it will be important to work out what those new uses are going to be and how much value they will create. James Truman also expects traditional media to survive in repurposed forms, with luxurious versions of magazines and books standing a much better chance than inexpensive

texts, because when people only want information in text form, they can find it for free online. Beautiful designs to enhance the reading experience for printed books and magazines will be more important. That's good news for the designers!

James sees a move from authority to conversation as exemplifying the change from mass to personal, with media becoming more transparent, implying that the participant can see through the medium because the tools of creation are accessible, so people no longer listen to lectures; instead, they make things themselves. Paul describes this as a new “creator economy.” The manufacturing economy of a hundred years ago was about making things cheaply and well enough to overcome scarcity. After World War II the manufacturing economy was replaced by the consumer economy, where the central actor was the person who purchased, enabled by the credit card. In a creator economy people make and consume at the same time.

James wonders whether that gives the creators the right to run the whole curriculum, pointing out the need for a balance between democratization and a hierarchy of control. Traditional media offer a chaperoned experience, but new media mix material that is created objectively and subjectively so that it is difficult to tell the difference.

For more than a decade James had the most influential voice in the content of all of the magazines published by Condé Nast, and from his perch he saw the influence of the street converge with the penthouse, with new titles emerging that were eclectic, integrating diversity in adventurous and exploratory ways. Eventually, as the pressures of competition and the Internet increased, they were forced to become vehicles for the needs of advertisers. He noticed cultural differences within the English-speaking world between Britain and the United States, with the former welcoming an abrasive quality that the latter rejects. He believes that teenage girls have an uncanny ability to see what is coming next and recommends tapping their intuitions as a form of design research. He sees more of the young and talented creative designers and innovators focusing on the Web, as the opportunities are more expansive there than they are in print, but he also expects advertising and editorial content to continue to need each other in paper publications.

The clash between new media and traditional media is most obvious in the different financial models, which still have a long way to go before balanced new structures emerge. Companies like Google and YouTube caught the wave early enough to gain dominant market share, leading to easy financial success from advertising revenue. Traditional media companies, particularly newspapers and magazines, face the most difficult challenges because their advertising revenue is eroding and they have large existing overhead costs. James sums it up when he says, “There has to be a new model of advertising that can satisfy advertisers and also keep the well-known brand names afloat.”

In his new book *Free*, Chris Anderson helps us understand the complimentary benefits of online material. As the marginal cost of bits is close enough to zero to round down, he sees “free” as a form of marketing to sell something that is not free. In the case of books, those who value traditional book attributes can upgrade to the premium version and pay the price for the superior form. The old idea of free samples is thus inverted: offering free access to everyone attracts the small number who take delight in the premium version and are willing to pay for it.

In 2001 Chris bet on the idea that the bursting of the dot-com bubble was about the stock market rather than the underlying technologies, and he designed *Wired* magazine to become a mainstream publication. He has been proved right, as many of the crash survivors have emerged as dominant new media providers, and *Wired* magazine continues to expand as it explains how technology is changing the world. He believes that the act of journalism, editing, and distribution are here to stay but that the forms that are designed to contain the contents will vary to fit the vehicle. I agree with him that everybody's job in the information world is to add value to the Web, as the “Web is the water we swim in,” but that the design of online material should be different from print, bringing amateur energy into the domain and leveraging the interactive elements to vote, dialogue, and aggregate.

Neil Stevenson contrasts the way in which we consume media, either sitting back to luxuriate in the material that is offered, as in a beautifully produced magazine or a movie, or leaning forward to steer or click, as in a Web search or a message dialogue. His description of enjoying the luxury media as you would a warm bath is apt. And designing for those media is very different from designing for active participation—nobody sits back to watch Google.

It is dangerous to assume that the same version of content can be sent down different pipes, like print, Internet, or mobile phone; each pipe needs a design that suits both format and behavior. Neil Stevenson offers some design rules for magazines, illustrating the nature of consensus that evolves as a medium adapts to changing circumstances. He explains the roots of reality TV, wondering whether the motivation for creating the formats was financially driven or motivated by the moral good in democratizing television.

Neil tells the story of his own experiment with living in two parallel media worlds, one as an editor of a lavishly produced magazine and the other as the facilitator of user-generated content on an anonymous weekly email and Web site about the private lives of celebrities. He points out that this kind of user-generated content, like Wikipedia, has to be created without financial rewards for the creators, as people prefer to donate their time to contribute, edit, or oversee the medium when they know that the organizers are also donating their efforts.

Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky, takes us into the world of music. As a disc jockey, he takes a piece of digital music and cuts, splices, and dices it to avoid the emotional connections of ownership, as music will be shared and repurposed whether or not the originator gives permission.

He feels more emotionally attached to the traditional media, like vinyl records. The repurposing of a medium that seems to be vanishing may keep it alive, but radical redesign will be needed. Scratching on turntables has different performance qualities than ripping digital files, but they both have value and are different from the purpose foreseen by the originators. The skill of designing a musical experience remains securely human, with no likelihood of the DJ being replaced by an algorithm or robot. The DJ is here to stay, continuously mastering the manipulation of new media.

THE FIRST INTERVIEW IN THE NEXT CHAPTER is with Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia. He explains how he harnessed the energies of a hierarchy of volunteers to manage user-generated content. For reasons similar to Popbitch, he kept the structure of the business a nonprofit foundation.

