

What would an African Web 2.0 look like?

Some thoughts on loneliness, community, social networking and new ways of being human

by Jarred Cinman

As a regular consumer of US technology news, I am currently bewildered and somewhat in awe of the flurry of new online services (what used to be called websites) which are springing up in the traditional cradle of Internet startups: southern California. As in the mid-90s, the valley is abuzz with every conceivable Internet startup innovation. And at their centre are two new turns the Web has made in recent years: the crowd and the cloud.

But as I look at my own continent, as war-torn and embattled as ever, dominating not technology news headlines but those involving violence, vote-rigging and starvation, it's hard to marry these two worlds. Over there, nothing less dramatic than the seeds of a new way of being human. And over here the great sorrows that perversely seem to define our species today. The shadows fall longest in the heart of Africa.

Johannesburg, I have always felt, is a point of convergence for these two global forces. It is why this city, is, I believe, one of the bleeding edges in the growth of human consciousness.

It is why I am drawn to be here, despite the many reasons to leave. It rises above crime and pessimism, it's two greatest flaws, and shows two paths forward, toward a better world or one from which we will all look back at this time as a paradise.

Starting with the personal computer in the early 80s, through the Microsoft age and into the explosion of the Internet in the last 10 years, we have been moving steadily toward something new not in degree but in kind. The world has seen nothing even remotely comparable with the Web. The Web is not, as many initially thought, an "information superhighway". That characterisation appears more naïve every day.

It is neither about information, nor the way that information moves around. It lacks both the order and routine the traffic analogy tempts us to imagine. And, most of all, it's not about getting anywhere.

The Web is an expression of the deeply human need to not be alone. It has taken some time for that version of the Web to emerge, but in what is widely being called "Web 2.0" it has done so. And with almost unimaginable speed.

There are maybe 100 million blogs on the planet, with a new one being put up every few minutes. Facebook has over 63 million users. And that's just to quote the best known and biggest numbers. There are countless millions who are users of thousands and thousands of other more humble online systems.

And what these all share, in my view anyway, is the promise of knowing you're not alone, and

knowing that you count.

I will return to Africa in a moment. But first I think it is useful to note that one of the most prevalent modern illnesses is depression. Many primitive cultures, anthropologists tell us, do not even have a word for this condition. And even if they know of it, it is an isolated and extreme phenomenon.

In industrialised countries, depression is epidemic. Despite our wealth and the endless time we have to entertain ourselves, the abundance of food and shelter and security, we are miserable. Anti-depressant drugs are bestsellers, and prescribed with little hesitation.

It would be far beyond the scope of this article or my knowledge to offer a definitive diagnosis for such a complex problem, but I will offer a gut-feel view anyway. Depression is a result of isolation, a sense of meaninglessness and the resulting sense of alienation from others and ourselves.

And the explosion of Web 2.0 and social networking is a direct result of the latent human need to re-establish those connections. I will give two quick illustrations of my point.

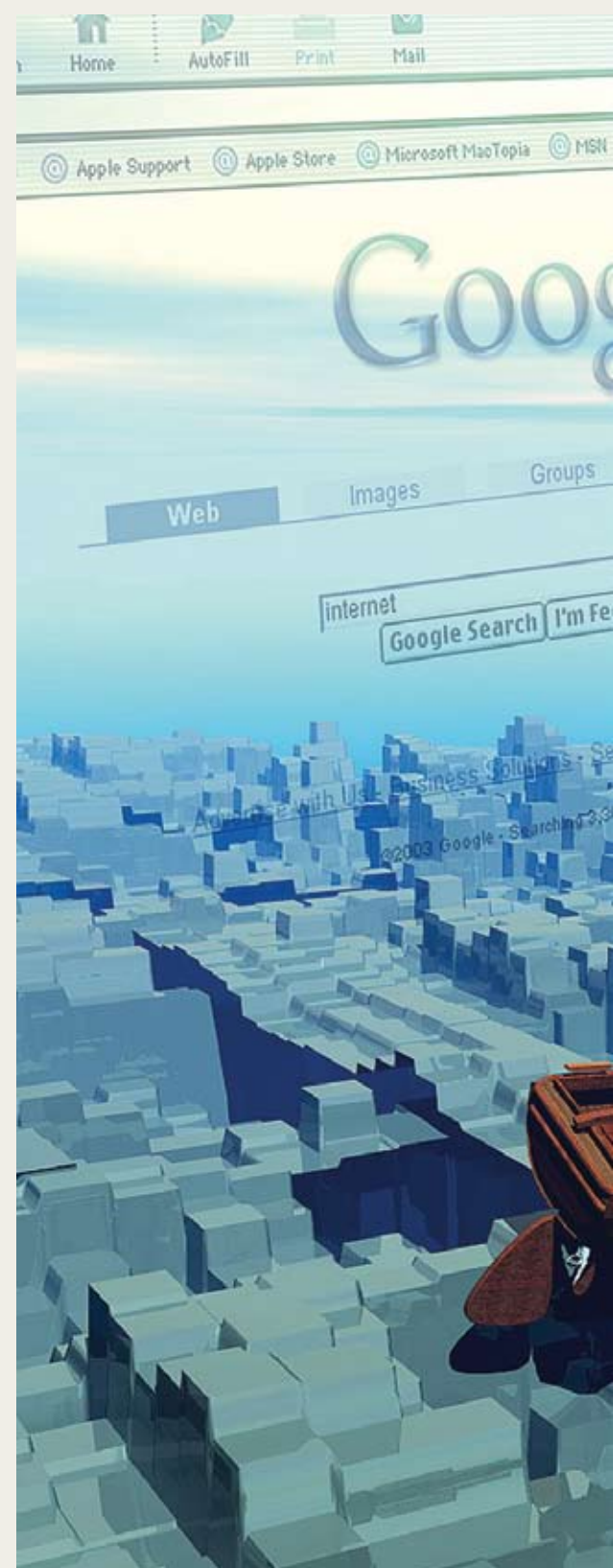
Blogging, while it comes in many forms, is primarily an opportunity for an individual to make their mark on a world stage. If that was where it started, a lot of effort is now being applied not to the blogging tools themselves, but the tools which enable the blog to be shared, discussed, rated and otherwise interlinked online. Make a valuable, interesting or useful post, and you are almost instantly acknowledged.

The unprecedented growth of photo- and video-sharing sites brings this kind of "lonesome no more" ethos to the forefront. By their million, people are generating images and video clips and sharing these with their networks. And it doesn't stop there. Services like Twitter allow your every move to be a known fact in your community. And newer systems like FriendFeed combine all of this into one view so that it's possible to share in the lives of your contacts – and they in yours – every minute of the day.

Again, there are many reasons why these forms of social interaction have emerged. But there can be no doubt that chief among them is the pressing human desire to feel important. To feel needed.

This is not an exclusively Western phenomenon obviously. The scale of some Internet applications in China, for example, or Japan, dwarfs that in the West. However, these are also highly industrialised countries. What of Africa?

Maslow might argue that Africa hasn't yet had the dubious opportunity to experience this kind of depressing alienation given the preoccupation with more basic aspects of life. But I would argue that in this respect, at least, the Web is yet another cultural phenomenon that has been invented elsewhere and



brought to Africa in a form that may ultimately not suit our temperament or our way of life.

For one thing, the sense of community that has been so effectively broken down in advanced industrialised nations, in the very process of industrialisation, has been preserved in Africa.

Yes, African cultures have been pressured in many other ways, particularly in highly urbanised areas, but it is plain to see that a sense of interconnectedness remains intact. A vivid symbol of this is the respect accorded the elderly in many African cultures. Unlike the West, in which old age is often associated with loneliness and increasing irrelevance, Africans have managed thus far to hold onto the idea of old age wisdom.

I would argue that cultures which have lost a sense of community have an increased problem with depression, directly linked to the removal of what communities create. For them, social networking, online dating and user-generated content have exploded because they are a manifestation of the desire to reform these communities. For cultures, of which many in Africa are still examples, in which this community has never been lost, the individual need to be noticed and affirmed has not been frustrated to the point of needing a digital alternative.

DIGITAL NATIVES

... *pffff*

IT'S NOT AN AGE THING. IT'S A CURIOSITY THING

by Mark Comerford

I have some issues with the digital native/digital immigrant meme.

I do not think it is a useful dichotomy as it makes age an arbitrary measurement of digital understanding. It makes it seem that if you are young enough, then you automatically have a digital mindset. I have seen no evidence of this. My j-students are often rigidly locked into an analogue vision of the industry, see print (or radio or TV, or even a mixture of all three but in an analogue manner) as their future and do not easily understand the principals of conversation contra lecturing that many of us propagate as the (only) future for journalism.

When I say analogue I am talking about mindset, not technology. One can master digital technology and still have an analogue mindset. This is the situation for more and more journalists today. They have some degree of technical knowledge (though that is often over-estimated) but no great conceptual grasp of the shift from analogue to digital.

The follow-on from this is that journalism educators develop courses that are tech-based and program-oriented which play to students' strengths but never challenge their underlying "analogue-ness".

Another problem with the meme is that it leads employers to believe that by just recruiting young people they will be gathering a base for change. This is leading to young, tech-savvy people being placed in leadership positions without them having the journalistic skills to make good strategic choices.

I know of one example where the publisher is 34, has very strong tech skills but no journalism background and is making decisions that will have a long term impact on the publication. This is a danger to the journalistic development of our industry. A danger that the "digital native" argument perpetuates.

Also, looking around me, the people making a difference seem to be over 30. Have a look at your own area and see if that is also the case for you.

I am over 50 and believe (possibly wrongly of course) that my grasp of the shift to digital and my immersion in and understanding of the process by far outstrips many (if not most) of the so-called natives. This is not to say that there are not many under 30 doing great things in journalism, just that they are not doing them because they are under 30.

It's not an age thing. It's a curiosity thing. Which makes me a bit sad that so few journalists get it. Curiosity should be our stock-in-trade.

<http://markmedia.blogs.com/markmedia/2008/05/digital-natives.html>



Francois Smit

The one technology that has enjoyed explosive growth in Africa is mobile telephony. Despite the high costs in South Africa, for example, almost every able-bodied person has a cellphone. This is not merely because of the success of marketing, but because the kind of communication that African communities desire is facilitated by mobile phones so well: on the move, outdoors and frequent. It is not an empty stereotype to argue that Africans are friendly. We are all about community, and cellphones are a glue for that community.

As social networking and the Web more broadly spreads across Africa, probably carried on cellphones or whatever the next mobile device will be called, it is my view that we will start to see the growth of an African Web 2.0 that differs sometimes subtly, and sometimes fundamentally, from its international counterpart.

And that difference will lie in the different kind of problems that it is solving for Africans. Not, I believe, an antidote to loneliness or a desperate desire to attain relevance in a sea of voices. But to enhance communities and to extend communication.

It seems reasonable to think the Internet will be a driver of social and political change and education in Africa, but perhaps, again, because

it will offer a way for communities to organise. The continent has a long history of revolution and struggle – with not always positive outcomes, of course. And this new communication channel holds the promise that it can be co-opted for change.

Which brings us finally back to Johannesburg. Seen as the “New York of Africa” by some, and certainly one of the continent’s most important cities, Johannesburg represents the best of what the first world has to offer technologically but still is, at heart, an African city. As Johannesburgers start to use new Internet technologies, it is here first that we may see the emergence of the first truly African social networking tools. Not merely copies of Facebook or Technorati or YouTube, but (like, for example, Mxit) tools that are expressions of a new digital face, an African digital, which may skip past all the egoistic nonsense that so mires the content on many Web 2.0 sites and, instead, breathe new life into the notion of an African Renaissance.

Because, in a lot of ways, at the heart of the Internet are principles that Africa has never lost. If we can overcome the many contextual challenges, we may yet have in our hearts and minds the seeds of the next version of community that no-one could do better than we can.