

The 20th Century Has Gone

The 20th Century has gone, and now we live in the 21st Century, a digital century, but sometimes when we look around it feels like the same old world it always was. Cars, burning oil. Posters and adverts, neon and signage. Books made of paper. Some things change so slowly that the incremental differences go more or less unnoticed until we focus directly on them.

For content creators, artists, creatives, we often do more of what we used to do. It often works, why change it too much? But one change is determining whether the art is likely to spread and be recognised: is what we're making today *internet-native*?

To be internet-native is to be ideal for sharing and spreading, to be accessible and distributable. Even if we're talking about a physical object, fans will spread photographs and text about it when given the chance. But the more adverts and clamours for attention that we have - songs, posters, banner adverts, advergames, digital billboards, screens - the less chance a signal has of being spotted in the noise.

Great creations won't be automatically recognised because they're great: they have to be noticed, too.

Attention is our scarcest resource. Time ticks on, but there are still and will forever be 24 hours in a day. Attention is *everything*. We pick out signals from the noise by listening to trusted sources: friends, and favourite authors, bloggers, tweeters, journalists, broadcasters, remixers. Curators, all of them. They spread the word, we investigate, to revel in the shared experience.

Sometimes the curators spread the works, too: two thirds of teenagers admit (and how many don't admit?) to sharing music, digitally, without paying for it. Of course they do: music is all about identity, and teenagehood is about creating and playing with identity. Copyright maximalists like Feargal Sharkey want them to stop this sharing, to go *back* to buying music and hoarding it, to learn to "respect copyright".

It won't work. We can't tell the majority of a population that they're criminals now for doing something humans intrinsically want to do, like sharing songs. Internet-native music currently looks like a free song, probably containing a code for discounts on merchandise and live event tickets. Kids are never going back to buying music when it's already free and shareable. Why should they?

Progress: television is next, and books, newspapers. One by one, the analogue business models of the past will be picked apart and digitised. Modernised. Many will fail, new ones will emerge, some will evolve. *Internet-native television* is television delivered globally at broadcast, on-demand. Probably containing product placement, or built-in sponsorship. Delivered to a collected audience, about whom the broadcaster knows really quite a lot. Maybe with short and nicely-targeted advertising delivered alongside. It's worth a try.

“Piracy” – as done by teenagers, all my friends, pretty much everyone I know, is simply *demand where appropriate supply does not exist*. Digital Rights Management (DRM) technologies – in other words, anti-copying, anti-fair use - are also anti-accessibility. They attempt to block and restrict, and they fail every time. Every single time. To be accessible, work needs to be available, always and to everyone. No delineations, no restrictions: it’s too messy. Too expensive. Too dull.

Restricting access restricts a person’s ability, as a creator, to be discovered. We must embrace accessibility, and think open and global. Think spreadable and shareable. Perhaps free, perhaps not: see what works. Try it: if you have a digitised creation, try selling digital copies. Try giving it away for free, alongside a tip jar. See what happens. Examine internet-native content producers like Joss Whedon – who has made far more money personally from his internet-native *Dr Horrible’s Singalong Blog* than he has for his Fox-broadcast *Dollhouse* – and Felicia Day, Amanda Palmer, Neil Gaiman, Warren Ellis, Justin.tv, Ze Frank. The entire community of *Etsy* craftants and *Spreadshirt*-ers.

Accessibility gives us competitive, business advantage. It is inclusive of the blind and partially-sighted, who make up 70% of us humans over our life spans. It is inclusive of other cultures and tastes, and gives the creator access to a potential audience of Everyone. It’s inclusive of learning and the sharing of knowledge. The accessible content will leapfrog the locked-down content. It’s cheaper, too, and doesn’t that make business sense?

To push past bigger, older, more established businesses, the solution is to be agile and modern, to be internet-native and innovative. The older, slower dinosaur-works will sink, weighed down by their expensive defenses, regulations and costly and pointless protection mechanisms. We must not let these dying behemoths take away someone’s internet access – and connection to the world - for some accusatory, unprovable “piracy” claim, *ever*. We must not let the internet’s neutrality be bought and sold by *corporations*. This is our free and global internet, in our 21st Century, and thinking of accessibility, it’s our greatest asset yet.

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