



OPTIMIZING FOR INTIMACY: THE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF COWBIRD.COM

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ABSTRACT

Cowbird is a small online community focused on the preservation of storytelling through the use of digital technology and the development of a new form of participatory journalism highlighting “the human stories behind major news.” The website’s broader cultural narrative is comprised of stories reflecting on creators’ direct contact and shared engagement with the events that happens around them (what its creators have defined as a “public library of the human experience”).

This case study explores Cowbird’s emerging communications paradigm and details the coding decisions that have fostered intimacy and facilitated empowered networked interactions within the site’s sub-communities. These efforts to design for intimacy include boundary characteristics, strategic use of image and sound, and social networking through the currency of stories rather than traditional commenting features. They have resulted in the cultivation of an intimate space within a very public environment that supports and encourages deeply personal disclosure.

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal text *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, communications theorist Marshall McLuhan famously proclaimed “the medium is the message,” explaining “the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (1964, p.7). This assertion, known as the Marshall Equation, has been widely misinterpreted as a belief that channels of information have precedence over content. What the McLuhan Equation is actually concerned with are the consequences engendered by the interface between the “message”—defined as the change a new innovation brings to the public sphere—and the “medium”—an extension of self, or anything from which change emerges (1964, p.8). Jonathan Harris, the creator and founder of the participatory website Cowbird, illuminates: “Every technology extends some pre-existing human urge or trait. A hammer extends the hand. A piano extends the voice. Facebook extends our urge to be noticed. Twitter extends our urge to be up to date” (personal communication, March 3, 2012).

Cowbird is a small online community focused on fusing elements of traditional storytelling with digital technology to preserve the art of storytelling and pioneer a new form of participatory journalism that highlights “the human stories behind major news.” The website is comprised of stories reflecting on creators’ direct contact and shared engagement with events that happen around them; what its creators define on the site as a “public library of the human experience.” The interface reduces barriers to creating beautiful multimedia stories that incorporate text, images, audio, maps, timelines, dedications and tags. As of March 26, 2012, the site had a membership of 10,482 people, with 2,221 participants identified as active users having shared at least one story. Roughly half of the stories emanated from the United States, followed by stories from the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada, India and France (A. Correal, personal communication, March 26, 2012).

Cowbird, the website explains, is “an alternative to the frenzied *shorter, faster, more* mindset that increasingly dominates our (digital) lives. [It is] a place to slow down and go deeper—less about sharing what you link to and like, and more about sharing what life’s really like” (Harris & Correal, 2011). Within the frame of McLuhan’s “medium,” Cowbird “extends our capacity for awareness and empathy, so we can see and feel more deeply” (J. Harris, personal communication, March 3, 2012). The socio-cultural change the medium of Cowbird fosters is an intimacy achieved through deliberate design applications and the alchemy of user interactions into sub-communities that offer support through listening, sharing and bearing witness to human experience.

DESIGNING FOR INTIMACY

The design methodology of Cowbird reflects a systems theory approach in which the structure creates the behavior. “All environments encourage certain kinds of behavior,” explains Harris. “If you live near a ski slope, you are more likely to ski. If you live near a beach, you are more likely to surf. With Cowbird, I wanted to create a space that felt like a church, or a forest, or a farm, or a library, or a wide-open field; a quiet space that would encourage contemplation and support people in the process of slowing down and going deeper” (personal communication, March 3, 2012).

The task of helping people feel comfortable, slow down and reflect is anathema to traditional experiences with and on the Internet. Building on the work of McLuhan, media critic Neil Postman asserts, “We have devalued the singular human capacity to see things whole in all their psychic, emotional and moral dimensions, and we have replaced this with faith in the powers of technical calculation” (1992, p.118). Cowbird seeks to counter this through design for intimacy. These can be broken down into three overarching categories of boundary characteristics, strategic uses of image and sound, and social networking through the currency of stories, rather than comments.

Boundary Characteristics

Privacy is defined as a feeling that one has the right to own private information, either personally or collectively (Morr Serewicz & Petronio, 2007). Whether actualized or not, this belief bolsters our sense of autonomy and makes us feel less vulnerable. The first step in this negotiation of privacy is a comprehension of publicness.

The Internet has created a new kind of public sphere in which technology, rather than physical proximity, enables people to share and connect. We are able to formulate and comprehend identities and observe people’s daily lives through direct in-person observation, and through responses ranging from Facebook updates to live video streams. This information, once shared, reshapes information ownership. This may have little consequence when revealing the contents of one’s lunch, but takes on heightened importance when revealing the contents of one’s heart. Therefore, it is important to distinguish these networked publics from mediated and unmediated publics because the underlying architecture of each arena impacts social interaction (Boyd, 2007, p. 8). Boyd explains four properties separate unmediated publics from networked publics:

- 1) *Persistence* of the network that extends well beyond a specific speech or action at a particular moment in time.
- 2) *Searchability* of the networked communication and the “digital body” of an individual.
- 3) *Replicability* of the network.
- 4) *Invisible audiences* that can receive our networked expressions and may interpret or share them in ways we did not intend.

“In short, a mediated public (and especially a networked public) *could* consist of all people across all space and all time” (Boyd, 2007, p.9). This reinforces the need for privacy negotiation. Privacy and personalization are independent constructs that work in tandem to facilitate online user engagement (Awad & Krishnan, 2006). Research by Pike, Bateman and Butler suggests the public nature of online spaces impacts this interplay (2009, p.1). The creation of psychological boundaries around information inform general opinion on how public a space is and, thereby, impact individuals’ self-disclosure behaviors. A user who *perceives* an online environment to be more private tends to share more personal information because the risk of vulnerability is lower, while a user who *perceives* a site to be more public will



disclose less information because of higher vulnerability risks (Pike et al, 2009). Perception is a critical component of the user experience and willingness to self-disclose. Although material may be publicly accessible, *perceptions* of privacy inform and impact understanding of privateness and publicness.

Privacy boundaries can be thick or thin. As we permeate these layers and share information, we reshape our online boundaries based on self-devised personal boundary rules largely designed to minimize risk and vulnerability (Petronio, 2008). Cowbird fosters a sense of safety within the space through specific boundary characteristics including mode-of-entry and ingroup/outgroup boundaries. "A social networking environment's mode of entry boundary is negatively associated with perceived publicness" (Pike et al, 2009, p.4). On Cowbird, users are required to request an invitation to join the site in which they must complete a short paragraph describing themselves and their stories. Once the invitation is accepted (in actuality, a low-barrier process designed to identify and eliminate salespeople and spammers), users are asked to compose a profile that includes an image and self-identified characteristics about the user such as "artist, brother, computer scientist, nomad, storyteller" (as detailed on founder Jonathan Harris' profile). Pike et al assert, "If the mode of entry boundary is sufficient to meet the discloser's boundary requirements, the need for an ingroup/outgroup boundary is lessened" (2009, p.4).

The ingroup/outgroup boundary reinforces the perception of an additional protective layer between site users and the public at large. For Cowbird, this boundary divides the users of the social networking environment into audiences. Members can join multiple audiences and receive updates on new stories added by selected authors.

Users are also able to make stories fully public or fully private. Private stories are closed to all members of the networked public (including those within the Cowbird community) and are used for drafts of stories and personal diaries. Public stories can be read by anyone within the networked public (i.e. with access to the Internet). However, only members are allowed to respond to site content and receive updates on site information. These boundary characteristics help induce a sense of intimacy—one that is further enhanced by additional design elements and strategies.

Strategic Use of Media Elements

In their work on virtual environments, Goslin and Morie determined, "an emotive response can be elicited in a subject through strategic use of imagery and sound in a virtual environment, which will enhance the sensation of immersion in the simulation and thereby help to compensate for the inadequacies of contemporary technology" (1996, p. 95). Designing for this response is one of the strongest distinguishing features of Cowbird. Founder Jonathan Harris explains:

The Occupy movement started happening [and] I began to realize that a new storytelling paradigm was necessary. The movement was writing its own history with tweets and live [video] streams, but those formats were disappearing almost instantaneously, drowning in the deluge of new information. On the other hand, the articles appearing in newspapers didn't begin to communicate the feeling of actually being there. I started taking pictures, and writing up short vignettes describing my experiences there, and started posting those stories on Cowbird. (Personal communication, March 3, 2012)

On Cowbird, viewers experience one media element at a time. First, a large image that Harris explains, "You have to step in to sort of like going into a lake. You swim around in it for awhile and it moves around with you like moving through water" (personal communication, March 26, 2012). If audio is included with the story, users stare at the image while listening to sound. Once those elements have been absorbed (through a slow scrolling of the image), viewers move on to text. (Writers are encouraged to format text with spaces to make the stories less crowded and more legible.) As readers continue to scroll, metadata illuminates how the single story connects to the larger Cowbird ecosystem. The site explains: "Add a location, and we'll add an interactive map. Add a date, and we'll add a calendar page. Add tags, and we'll connect your story to similar stories. Add characters, and we'll build you an ever-growing cast of your life" (Harris & Correal, 2011).

This engagement can, perhaps, be best described as interdependence. Through the coding of metadata, Cowbird automatically finds similarities and connections between users' stories, thus weaving them into collective narratives organized by date, place, theme, authors and more. The goal of telling stories from within the experience is reinforced by this layout; it is an advancement toward a larger, singular human story. Research on virtual worlds indicates this kind of emotional immersion stimulates immediate sensory perception and increases user acceptance of virtual worlds as "less a construct and more a personal experience" (Goslin & Morie, 1996, p. 97).

The design of Cowbird is in contrast to most user experiences on the Internet. A typical website has numerous design elements competing for a user's attention: images, text, links, banner advertisements, sidebars with additional information, icons indicating ways to share material and tallies highlighting how many times content has been tweeted or "liked." Within that cluttered context, opportunities to fully immerse into a single experience are slim. Harris adds, "If I'm a storyteller and I've put a lot of my soul into telling a story and then you're looking at it while hyper-multitasking and looking at lots of other stuff. . .that makes me feel worse about giving so much of myself into this thing you're going to give so little of yourself to" (personal communication, March 26, 2012). The measured unfolding of content minimizes this sentiment by requiring viewers to slow down and pay attention in order to fully consume the story.

Stories as Social Networks

The dominant modes of communication on most social networks are messages, comments and enabling features through which to like or share content. This networked information is often shared and re-shared with little time for reflection or deep engagement—and is subject to both negative and positive commentary. Cowbird engages users in deeper response levels and inhibits negativity by limiting mechanisms for response. Harris explains, "There's no commenting where people can be negative. There's no way for people to actually express negative sentiments. You can only express positive things. You can love stories [and] you can join somebody's audience. You can sprout a story from their story and you can dedicate a story like giving a gift to somebody but there's no avenue for negativity" (personal communication, March 3, 2012).

This design contributes to the sense of safety within the networked public. Cowbird members create and share within a safe space where they can express themselves freely without the risk of being criticized, which, in turn, fosters a momentum of greater disclosure of private information. This act of disclosure creates (willingly or not) a confidant—or confidants—within the Cowbird readership and draws readers into a collective privacy boundary (Petronio, 2008). They, in essence, become co-owners of the story. As co-owners, people often assume a level of responsibility for the information. Annie Correal, Cowbird's Community Manager, highlights two kinds of empathy generated by this process: "the empathy created by reading about others (as they describe themselves), and the empathy created by going out and writing/photographing/recording others" (personal communication, March 2, 2012). This empathy has given rise to smaller sub-communities, including one group of people who have lost their loved ones to suicide and talked about the experience. The group has proactively responded to stories in which suicidal tendencies have been referenced. Correal describes this as, "a startling example of the sort of dialogue that can take place by reflecting on stories—and communicating through stories" (personal communication, March 3, 2012).

Correal identifies the development of these sub-communities thusly:



A few stories early on seem to have drawn people out of the general pool and inspired them to write stories on the same theme/experience. In many cases these writers continue to write on that theme/experience after the first time, so it seems that feeling they are part of a smaller community within the larger community has a generative effect that maintain its membership. It's a community that recognizes itself as such. One of the authors, Leigh, realized an author would be notified if she "dedicated" a story to them. She dedicated a story to Gillian, another author who had lost a sibling to suicide, and then changed the dedication (and later dedicated it to her deceased brother). This may have been her having second thoughts. But it may have also been a subtle way of saying, "Hey, I hear you"—a way to use a feature of the system to show she felt connected to this young woman who had gone through the same thing. You could also venture to say that Alex's "Please don't kill yourself" story and the response is an extension of this community of people grappling with suicide. (Personal communication, March 3, 2012)

Cowbird is a critique and departure from existing social networks, yet also reflects the same issues and challenges that surface in networked, mediated and unmediated publics.

CONCLUSION

Marshall McLuhan believed "the aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology (1965, p. 5). Few websites have come close to achieving this in the same way as Cowbird. Design choices around boundary characteristics, the unfolding of media elements and inclusion of metadata, and the use of stories as the primary form of feedback have resulted in an online experience that supports depth of feeling and fosters intimacy, manifesting Harris' vision of software as medicine: "You can observe a given community, and you can start to see the things that are ailing it. Then, you can build software programs designed to counteract those ailments. . . If the programs are well-designed and popular, millions of people can start using them in a matter of days or weeks or months. And when they start using them, their behavior will change" (J. Harris, personal communication, March 3, 2012).

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