Abstract
This article responds to the articles about ‘Media Studies 2.0’ featured in this special issue of Interactions. Key features of ‘Media Studies 2.0’ are restated: (1) Considerable changes in the media ecosystem, where internet-based technologies now blur the range of places where users can encounter, interact with and contribute to media content; (2) The collapse of separate categories of ‘producer’ and ‘audience’, as growing numbers of people become creators and curators of digital media; (3) A turn away from ‘professional’ media productions, towards the everyday participatory and creative possibilities of today’s media.

The article notes William Merrin’s sophisticated contributions to this debate, and goes on to consider some of the criticisms made about ‘Media Studies 2.0’. It notes that commentary in this field tends towards either celebration or condemnation of new technologies, and suggests that a more measured discussion of the role of media in people’s lives might prove more illuminating.

I have been invited to provide a response to the articles in this special issue because, alongside William Merrin, we seem to have started a ball rolling, almost two years ago now (at the time of writing). In February 2007, I published an article entitled ‘Media Studies 2.0’ on my website, Theory.org.uk, and once I’d written it I found that Merrin had started a blog with the same title, three months previously. At that time, Merrin’s blog was mostly a set of informative postings about new media developments, but the very first post on the blog – which naturally I then linked to in my own piece – made a convincing argument that Media Studies lecturers need to catch up with their students in the digital world.

My original article was a short ‘provocation’ – saying something I believed in, of course, but intended to stimulate debate. Which seems to have worked. Tara Brabazon, in this issue, describes that debate as unusually bitter and vexed. I didn’t especially think so – debate that goes to the heart of the work that people have built their careers on is often a little fractious. In this particular case it is, shall we say, at least possible that some of the negative reaction on email discussion lists may have come from tutors who are quietly frightened that they are never going to be able to catch up with ‘all this new-fangled stuff’ and are hoping that they can somehow prop up their study of twentieth century media into another couple of decades of the twenty-first, before the blessed relief of retirement releases them from this embarrassing bind. (This diagnosis would not apply, of course, to the much more informed and sophisticated responses such as those in this issue).
Naturally my characterisation of ‘Media Studies 1.0’ was a simplification of the more depressing and traditional aspects of current media studies, and I had assumed it would go without saying that many parts of the field were actually nothing like that, and were doing fabulous, insightful, and/or up-to-date things. I also did not intend that ‘Media Studies 2.0’ should be seen as an all-new replacement of what had gone before, but was just an indicator of the directions in which we might seek an upgrade. Therefore when Dovey & Lister (in this issue) mention various interesting researchers and good works to show that media studies haven’t been doing that badly, of course I take their point, although I had not meant to suggest that the whole field is that backwards. (This would be my own fault for writing a polarised, polemical piece).

Outstanding work is being produced in numerous places, of course, and many people have taken on board the changes that digital media have brought along. The ‘1.0’ was never meant to describe everybody, but rather just the now-outdated ways of doing things that we might be hoping to move away from, and which a number of people have already discarded.

Since those debates of spring 2007, rather than getting bogged down in some inward-looking shootout amongst media studies teachers, I have mostly been getting on with other things: continuing to be both an observer and contributor to online culture, and writing some related articles, but more centrally seeking to make links between the kinds of creative production we can see online with other more traditional, hands-on tools that might foster creative ways of thinking (2007, 2008a). In seeking to link this with a political critique of traditional media and an attempt to see how we might generate creative solutions to environmental problems (2008b), I hope that I might not be branded with the misconceived ‘celebrating new technology’ label – suggesting that we are just fans of the corporate status quo – which Andrejevic, Brabazon and Taylor all try to wave in our direction.

Meanwhile, William Merrin has refined the argument to the point where he is able to present his excellent case for, and defence of, Media Studies 2.0 as presented in this journal. There is not much point in me restating all of the arguments from my original MS2.0 article here (it is online at www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm), and equally pointless for me to admiringly repeat the excellent points made by William Merrin’s article in this issue. Nevertheless, I will briefly highlight some features of both.

For me, Media Studies 2.0 is primarily:

- A recognition of the straightforward fact that the media landscape has changed significantly in the past fifteen years, so that the traditional textbook categories of ‘film,’ ‘television,’ ‘newspapers,’ etc., along with ‘the Internet’ in a parallel but separate category, are increasingly redundant, as Internet-based technologies are used to blur the range of places where we can encounter, interact with and contribute to media content. The Internet has not only become hugely important in itself, but has forced all the media around it to change accordingly. See John Naughton’s article ‘Blogging and the Emerging
Media Ecosystem’ (2006), which uses the metaphor of an ecosystem to show that the growth in new types and uses of digital media forces the whole media system to adapt. (This demonstrates how it makes no sense to say ‘I’m not concerned with all this interactive stuff as I am a specialist in film/television/newspapers,’ although some of our critics have more or less said that).

• A corresponding recognition that the separate categories of ‘producer’ and ‘audience’ are collapsing, as a growing number of people become creators, curators, arrangers and remixers of digital media. This can sound starry-eyed, but there is a growing body of evidence that this is just normal stuff in many modern, developed societies. For instance, an apparently reliable survey of over 2,000 people in the US aged between 13 and 75, conducted in October 2007 (commissioned by Deloitte and conducted by Harrison Group, an independent research company: details at Deloitte (2008), also reported in New Scientist, 15 March 2008), found that 32 per cent of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘somewhat agreed’ with the statement: ‘With all the technology available to me today, I actually consider myself to be a “broadcaster” of my own media’, and 54 per cent of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘somewhat agreed’ with the statement: ‘I am increasingly making my own entertainment through editing my own photos, videos and/or music’. Whilst we might have some scepticism about a commercial survey, even if it is only roughly correct to say that a third of the US population felt able to say ‘I am a broadcaster’, this is quite striking and would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier.

• Building on these points, and following the participatory and creative dimension of Web 2.0, ‘Media Studies 2.0’ is interested in the everyday participatory and creative possibilities of media, as compared to the focus of traditional media studies on professional media consumed by audiences who had to take what they were given. At the same time it is concerned with the ‘dark side’ of this phenomenon, which Marc Andrejevic highlights, where users knowingly or unknowingly participate in their own surveillance by the corporations who often have access to this data.

‘Media Studies 2.0’ also emphasises a sociological focus on the media as it is in the world, and as people experience it – and therefore is (happily, but less crucially) associated with a welcome end to the armchair ramblings of ‘textual analysis,’ which represent the antithesis of informed sociological commentary and critique, and a recognition that the boundaries which ‘film studies’ and ‘television studies’ seek to place around themselves are meaningless artefacts of last century’s media landscape.

My own interventions in this area are probably seen as simplistic and arrogant, and at the same time I think life is too short to devote much time trying to persuade those who think that ‘media studies’ is primarily about television just because it is the medium they grew up with. (We’ve all seen the statistics, of course, which show that young people in the West spend more time online than watching TV. [Google ‘more time online than watching tv’ to find a substantial number of reports]. The old guard typically take this as evidence that young people are flighty click-happy
lightweights, which is not the best way of dealing with significant national and international shifts in the landscape of media use).

Thank goodness, then, for William Merrin, who has set out the arguments in a sober and elegant manner, and anticipated many of the criticisms that opponents might have hoped to chuck in his path. He makes it clear that Media Studies 2.0 is not a rejection of traditional forms of media, but is interested in the ways in which they are changing; is interested in new media, but is not a celebration of it; and is interested in all forms of media, including non-broadcast and pre-broadcast media. (He even cunningly accuses 'Media Studies 1.0' of being ahistorical, since it is only concerned with the twentieth century broadcast forms).

Readers of Merrin’s argument will hopefully be persuaded, too, that ‘Media Studies 2.0’ does not ignore inequalities of access to media and telecommunications – rather, it makes these more visible, by looking at the full range of media possibilities. It is only when we consider, for example, the role of access to online political social networks versus a diet of satellite-TV soaps and gameshows, that we can begin to evaluate which populations are ‘media rich’ and which are ‘media poor’. (I am not saying that access to online political social networks can change people’s lives; I am saying it is a worthwhile dimension of a research project). Discussions of new media always seem to bring up the issue of access, and this is a welcome change from the ‘1.0’ status quo, which for some reason never really seemed troubled by the question of whether people could afford to, say, go to the cinema or buy a daily newspaper, both of which are luxuries which cannot regularly be enjoyed by many millions.

Importantly, Merrin notes that critics may attempt to dismiss Media Studies 2.0 with cries of ‘technological determinism’ (correctly predicting Andrejevic and Brabazon, who attempt to sound that note in this issue). He rightly highlights how inappropriate this response is: to notice the arrival of new technologies, and to be curious about how they are being used by individuals, governments, businesses and other organizations, has nothing to do with assuming that it has any particular kind of inevitable implications or impact.

Andrejevic’s critical dimension
Marc Andrejevic then advances the notion of Media Studies 2.0 in a valuable critical direction. He asserts that ‘critical media studies is not interested in media for their own sake, but for society’s sake,’ which is precisely my perspective (and probably that of many of us – except, of course, for the textual analysis crowd, which is why I was keen to dump them earlier). We then come across a ‘cup half full/cup half empty’ divide, of course. Some of us are interested in the potential of media to play a role in political organization, improve social life, enable people to connect, communicate their ideas, and so on, and we tend to dwell on that potential. Others, like Andrejevic, nod towards that potential, but play the equally important role of reminding the hopeful optimists that these possibilities often come with a downside.

I generally admire Marc Andrejevic’s writing, and included a chapter by him in the second edition of Web Studies (2004). In his contribution to this issue, though, some of his rhetorical devices are uncharacteristically
simplistic: for instance, you can’t really prove the awfulness of something that became popular in recent years just because George W. Bush was also awful during the same period. Meanwhile, the idea that interactivity is by definition political or ‘empowering’ is indeed outdated, as he demonstrates in his examples of this naïve view, most of which are more than a decade old (being from 1993, 1997, 1998, and 2003).

The author is also sometimes guilty of fuzzing the boundaries of the debate in order to make winning points. This is mostly done by assuming that the proponents of ‘Media Studies 2.0’ are fans of, and apologists for, every kind of electronic ‘interactive’ media. For example, the examples of videogame players or web-surfers being passive receivers of advertising or ideological messages do indeed show that old-fashioned ‘1.0’ use of the Web or interactive media can be criticised via the tradition of Horkheimer and Adorno; this media may indeed be served up and consumed in a way which is not so different to non-‘interactive’ broadcasting. The chilling example of games developers being encouraged to slip in messages that will not be considered critically is especially telling.

However, Andrejevic’s point blurs the difference between the now-traditional form of ‘interactive’ media – media made by someone else which wants you to click its buttons – and ‘2.0’ media, where everyday non-professional, non-commercial people are making and sharing creative media themselves. I thought that ‘Media Studies 2.0’ involved excitement about the latter, but not especially the former.

And whilst accusing others of being over-simplistic, Andrejevic refuses to accept that something could involve both positive and negative elements at the same time. The inescapable nature of online advertising, and the fact that it supports many of the otherwise interesting developments that we might be interested in, is indeed a disappointment, but is not sufficient evidence that the services themselves are either evil or rubbish. Personally, I am no fan of advertising. (I could have paid the running costs of my site Theory.org.uk, and made a tidy profit based on the number of page-views it has received over the past decade, but have always known that I would never want to have advertising on it). Nevertheless, in spite of my own purist tendencies, I would not cite advertising in itself to somehow ‘show’ that a site was all bad. Similarly, if we choose to use sites such as Facebook then we may provide them with valuable data about ourselves, which is highly problematic, but is not enough to expose it as a ‘100 per cent Bad Thing’ which is no good for anybody.

**Gunkel’s computers as actors**

In his contribution, David Gunkel seeks to bury the old-fashioned term ‘computer mediated communication’ (CMC), which is, of course, welcome. In *Web Studies* (2000) I tried to dismiss ‘the irritatingly over-used acronym “CMC”‘, which seemed dated even then: an attempt to keep interactive media in its place by picturing it like a telephone with fancy ideas. This way of looking at online technology did not die, of course – especially in the US – and still needs to be sat on. Gunkel offers a detailed analysis of the ways in which CMC has situated computers as a transparent kind of medium through which human beings communicate. This is not, of course, a satisfactory approach.
Gunkel points towards an alternative paradigm which is primarily defined by seeing computers themselves as social actors in the media landscape. At this point I start to feel a little old-fashioned myself, as I am not certain that this should be the defining characteristic of 'Media Studies 2.0'. At present, the things that computers do continue to be pretty much the things that people have told them to do. Certainly there are systems that use forms of artificial intelligence to generate responses which have not been dictated in advance, but the interesting aspects of online technologies are still what people do with them. Computer-based technologies give this activity shape, but seeing the computer as another social actor seems to me to be one step too far at the moment – and when it comes to this, I share Paul Taylor’s concerns about ‘humachines’ and Heidegger’s concern about technology entering our lives with ‘immaterial effects that go beyond its immediate materiality’.

The CMC notion of the Internet offering merely ‘a telephone with a screen’ is much too limited, but the paradigm which replaces it should still be centred around the things that humans do, both on an individual basis, and in the form of organizations and corporations which have particular agendas (at which point we can bring back some of Andrejevic’s better points).

Brabazon’s recordings
It is difficult to respond to Tara Brabazon’s piece since it is not really about ‘Media Studies 2.0’ at all. After her opening remarks about the debate over this term, the article moves on to something entirely different, namely the use of iPods and other sonic technologies in education.

I trust that readers will have noticed that none of the exponents of ‘Media Studies 2.0’, to my knowledge, have ever advocated the replacement of face-to-face teaching and learning with technological alternatives. We may often be in favour of audio, video, and online materials as supplementary learning aids (which is entirely normal these days) – and this puts us in exactly the same boat as Brabazon, who asserts proudly that ‘in my own teaching-led research, podcasts and sonic sessions are deployed as supplementary, rather than as the main platform for teaching’. Quite right – but I don’t know whom she thinks she is arguing with. Personally, I think that good human teachers – or facilitators of learning, to use a better but inelegant term – are absolutely essential. Teaching is about inspiring students, and encouraging curiosity – not just laying down a platter of pre-recorded ‘learning resources’.

In any case, online teaching packages are a very ‘1.0’ phenomenon. Indeed, this is the problem with Brabazon’s whole argument. Recording lectures – whether on wax cylinder, cassette tape, iPod, or anything else – is a thoroughly ‘1.0’ idea, and not a very clever one. Brabazon triumphantly shows that distributing recorded lectures won’t change anybody’s life, which is a fine point, but has nothing to do with the debate about a ‘Media Studies 2.0’.

The more interesting and relevant bits in Brabazon’s discussion are the parts where students themselves might be developing audio responses and resources. This activity seems disappointingly contained, though: the Duke university students apparently used their iPods-with-microphones
to record university lectures (very conventional) and their own fieldwork interviews (better, but still conventional). I was hoping to hear that they had started making and sharing their own original pedagogic material. Brabazon’s own students are asked to make sonic media artefacts, which must lead to some fascinating work, but again this activity occurs because of, and is poured into, the conventional path of being submitted for assessment.

Of course, we are generally all part of that conventional system and I am not claiming any better practice for myself. Indeed, it sounds like good stuff for both staff and students. But ‘Media Studies 2.0’ would point towards a world where students are making and sharing learning resources, individually and collaboratively, and responding to each other, in the way that YouTube contributors do when a community of enthusiasts create, share, and respond to each other’s contributions in a virtuous spiral of learning and development. (In my mind – perhaps only for the selfish and possibly incorrect reason that I enjoy teaching and believe that I can add something to the student experience – this would be student-led activity which occurs on top of the basic groundwork laid by face-to-face learning and teaching).

Hermes, Dovey and Lister

Joke Hermes applies her usual sensitivity to the place of audience studies in the changing media landscape, offering the sensible formulation that ‘Media Studies 2.0 ... needs to theorize audience-hood as a layered palette of activities, attachments and investments, widely differing in intensity and importance, especially paying attention to how audience-hood is caught up in everyday social relations’. The use of ‘mattering maps’ suggests a concrete way to show these diverse affiliations, and the ‘co-creation’ with participants of an experience which is both media research and media production creates a valuable platform which refuses to patronise the people who take part, crediting them instead with creative and intellectual abilities.

Dovey and Lister, in their contribution, point to a number of ways in which my characterisation of ‘Media Studies 1.0’ was over-simplistic and ignored various positive things that people have done to move away from that traditional model (as mentioned above). These points are all fine, and somewhat unnecessary, since the ‘1.0’ model was not intended to summarize the whole field as it currently is, but rather was a description of the traditional way of doing things which still, surprisingly, hangs around in a number of media studies courses and textbooks. Their welcome examples of impressive pedagogic practice make valuable connections both backwards (into media history and the important insights of old media studies) and forwards (giving students the opportunity to break out of the traditional university space and share their work internationally). Their ‘evolutionary’ approach is entirely sensible, and fits perfectly well with the shift from ‘1.0’ to ‘2.0’ that William Merrin and I were suggesting: just as Web 2.0 emerges from, and sits within, the earlier more unidirectional uses of the Web, we never said that Media Studies 2.0 was an all-new subject, or a sequel to the previous one.
Taylor’s bulletproof challenge

It is difficult for me to comment on Paul Taylor’s contribution since we will clearly not find much space for agreement, even though again I think it something of a ‘cup half full – cup half empty’ kind of divide. For Taylor, though, the cup is entirely empty, and he points accusing fingers at those who even try to spot one drop of honey in the bottom of it.

Our starting points are not especially different. I am, unsurprisingly, opposed to human exploitation and environmental destruction. I am clearly on the side of the master woodcarver, not the flat-pack furniture industry, in the fruitful metaphor that Taylor describes. But already this metaphor connects directly with my own experience with old and new media, in a way that does not line up with Taylor’s assumptions. Before the Web, I had no opportunity to communicate with large numbers of geographically-dispersed people directly; at ‘best’, individuals or groups could compete for one of the very rare opportunities in which their ideas might be subjected to industrial processes of fashioning and editing, to appear in traditional media. But the Web enabled me to play a role which is clearly the one that maps onto the metaphor of the ‘master woodcarver’, and is nothing like that of the Ikea customer. I am not boasting that I have wholly ‘mastered’ the medium, but I do control all aspects of my site: I have made and designed every part of it, from the bottom up, with simple tools and not much expense. (This would probably not, of course, be the case if I was one of the two billion people living on less than two dollars a day, as Taylor notes, but, although we should always remember that important qualification, it surely cannot be wheeled out to halt any and every discussion of online media). Crafting such a site has brought me into two-way communication with hundreds of people, plus thousands more readers, although the content is all controlled by me, and could not be interfered with by anyone. (This description shows that I am not reaping the benefits of a more collaborative and participatory Web 2.0 kind of set-up, of course, but I contribute in other ways to parts of the Web 2.0 world, such as Wikipedia, which is also much more of a mass woodcarving more than it is a flat-pack supermarket, despite the constraints of the encyclopaedia’s ‘neutral point of view’).

My own case only illustrates the point about individuals being able to create their own media material for what you might sniffily call ‘personal self-expression’. The superior examples are all those activists and organizations that have used online collaborative and participatory tools to raise awareness of many vital issues, and to organize political action. Someone like Taylor can always say, as he does here, that these ‘have met with limited success’ but – crikey! – everything has to start somewhere, and there are numerous well-documented cases where online campaigns have made an impact, and brought people together to engage in real-world action. Measured against the task of bringing about the demise of global capitalism, their success has indeed been ‘limited’, but perhaps this is setting the bar rather high. Academics writing articles for specialist journals have also ‘met with limited success’ in this department.

I am not sure that Taylor has actually demonstrated that Internet-based communication is ‘systematically enframing’, and I am not sure what alternatives are being proposed. It we accept that we are likely to be
living in a world with media in it, do we prefer the old model where only elites had the power and resources to decide who could produce and distribute it, or the newer one where a great many more people can create and contribute? Am I wrong to suggest that the latter is better?

Taylor is, of course, right to be concerned about many aspects of the corporate online world and the ways in which apparently enabling technologies can be co-opted, only serving to reinforce the status quo. But I think we have to look for sparks of hope and change as well. Taylor, however, seems especially opposed to any chink of sunlight – the ‘saving power’ – in the work of writers who are, as he says, ‘otherwise critical theorists of technology’. In this mode of critique, only pessimism can ever be allowed. Of course, there may be much to be pessimistic about, but once we get to the point where even thoughtful critical theorists are dismissed because they have tried to see some light at the end of the tunnel ... where can we go from there?

Conclusion
We have seen, then, that some commentators refuse to allow that online technologies might be anything other than ‘Bad Things’. I would argue that we need to be cautious about the ways in which capitalist institutions may seek to pervert the possibilities of new media, and wary of the ways in which data is gathered about ourselves; but the idea that we have to debate the possibilities of new technologies by taking one of two positions – either entirely damning or wholly celebratory – is plain silly. Having kicked-off the debate with a rather polarized caricature of the state of media studies myself – ‘1.0’ versus ‘2.0’ – I find myself pointing out that the oppositions suggested by critics of ‘Media Studies 2.0’ are just as polarized, and perhaps more absurd: is it not possible that the uses of technology could be positive in some ways, negative in others?

Those of us who are willing to consider this ‘possibly good – possibly bad’ scenario – cautious, but looking for flickers of optimism – can find it instructive to consider the ideas of Ivan Illich, the radical thinker who suggested (in a series of popular books in the 1970s) that overdeveloped institutions were crushing the life out of society. Illich suggested that the institution of school made people stupid, institutionalised medicine made people sick, and the institution of business ruined the planet. This may not sound very optimistic either, but Illich is not merely committed to gloom.

In his 1973 book, *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich set out his vision of how society needed tools which encouraged individual creativity, enabling people to give shape and character to their own lives, rather than those tools which tend to impose a mass sameness. For Illich, a ‘tool’ is anything used to produce some thing or effect, so it includes drills and brooms, cars and power stations, and even schools and hospitals. This broad use of the term enables him to pull together everything that is designed to do something, whether that is to dig a ditch or to create an ‘educated’ person. ‘Conviviality’ for Illich means ‘autonomous and creative intercourse among persons ... the opposite of industrial productivity’ (1973: 11). This brings us to his vision of a preferable kind of society:

A convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others. People feel
joy, as opposed to mere pleasure, to the extent that their activities are creative; while the growth of tools beyond a certain point increases regimentation, dependence, exploitation, and impotence. (Illich 1973: 20)

Therefore, convivial tools can be freely used, or not; do not require particular qualifications; and ‘allow the user to express his meaning in action’ (Illich 1973: 22). In Illich’s terms, a site on the Web could be a convivial tool – and therefore part of the solution to the problems faced by modern societies – insofar as it offers the opportunity for free and unconstrained expression and sharing of ideas and culture. If such a site or service is moderated by an institution, or is unnecessarily complex, or requires specialist knowledge, proprietary codes or licenses, or cannot be freely shared, it becomes an ‘industrial tool’, and part of the problem.

Tools are intrinsic to social relationships. An individual relates himself in action to his society through the use of tools that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his tools, he can invest the world with his meaning; to the degree that he is mastered by his tools, the shape of the tool determines his own self-image. Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. Industrial tools deny this possibility to those who use them and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others. (Illich 1973: 21)

When Illich writes about the convivial tools which may help to foster freedom, one tends to think of Wikipedia and other open-source and Web 2.0 projects; when he writes about the crushing closed industrial model, one inevitably thinks of Microsoft.

For Illich, free and playful access to a world of information and communication, as is offered by sites such as Wikipedia and YouTube (which offers scores of visual home-made ‘how to’ guides and demonstrations, and simply videoed sharing of craft techniques by individuals in every area from robotics and engineering to cooking and breast-feeding), offers a route to self-determination. I am sure that some of the critics of MS2.0 will scoff at this idea; but the shift from couch-potato culture to making-and-doing culture is an important and fruitful one, and has to start somewhere. ‘Now we only ask what people have to learn and then invest in a means to teach them,’ Illich notes. ‘We should learn to ask first what people need if they want to learn and provide these tools for them’ (1973: 65). Self-determined sharing of knowledge with peers seems to be just the kind of thing Illich would recommend.

Think of the generic fare of a mainstream TV broadcaster compared with the diversity of material available on YouTube. More than twenty years before anyone could make such a comparison, Illich wrote:

Industrial innovations are planned, trivial, and conservative. The renewal of convivial tools would be as unpredictable, creative, and lively as the people who use them. (Illich 1973: 75)
The wealth of freely-shared information available today on the Web certainly matches Illich’s claim, and suggests that a number of Web 2.0 services have the potential to be ‘convivial tools’. It is easy to get carried away, of course. There are ‘terms of use,’ and the potential influence of advertisers and investors – although the actual impact of these forces on online content does not seem to be great in the west, except in certain notable cases. (In such cases we obviously wouldn’t be talking about ‘convivial tools’ – it’s not all-or-nothing). More crucially, the percentage of people who actually spend a lot of time making and sharing information and culture online is still rather small, whilst poverty, social exclusion, and the general exploitative capitalist gloom that Illich despised are still common.

It can be frustrating when commentators seem determined only to find the good, or the bad, in new technologies and their possibilities. To advance this debate, we need to find ways to hold more than one thing in the air at once – to move beyond entirely dismissive criticism, or starry-eyed celebration, to a sensible debate which can sift the nuggets of hope from the darkness, and suggest both possibilities for positive social change as well as analyses of social and environmental harm.

Works cited


Suggested citation
Many ideas grow better when transported into another mind than in the one where they sprang up.

Oliver Wendell Holmes