

Dear Marketers - The Web Is Not A TV Channel

On David Foster Wallace, the Social Web and How We Watch Now

This essay was inspired by [David Foster Wallace](#)'s own essay, E Unibus Plurum; Television and U.S. Fiction [1993,] on how television is an incredible gauge of the generic and how [at the time] that affected new fiction writing. It appears in his collection '[A Supposedly Fun Thing I Will Never Do Again.](#)' Wallace also discusses, rather neatly, another influence of mine – Don Delillo's novel [White Noise](#), written 25 years ago. From Wikipedia – “White Noise explores several themes that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, e.g., rampant consumerism, media saturation, novelty intellectualism, underground conspiracies, the disintegration and re-integration of the family, and the potentially positive virtues of human violence. The title “white noise” may be a metaphor pointing to the confluence of all of those aforementioned symptoms.”

Cheap Holidays In Other People's Misery

In the past two decades TV viewers in the U.S. stepped up to another level of armchair voyeurism – glueing themselves to the screen as they voraciously gobbled up untold amounts of reality TV garbage. [The [Sex Pistols](#) had a great song back in 1977 called Holidays In The Sun which included the lyric - 'Cheap Holidays In Other People's Misery.' I mention it here, as it seems rather fitting.]

As we begin a new decade, 17 years since Wallace wrote that essay, how we “watch” has now changed forever. We view the social web through a TV-shaped monitor but the similarities end right there. 17 years ago, as much as any outgoing, wildly exhibitionist young person would have loved to expose themselves [literally and figuratively] on a reality TV show, they couldn't. That was because of the walled garden approach those TV show's producers took – you had to be invited, you had to audition. Now, the simple

act of opening your browser means you are unequivocally participating in the social web – a wholly different technology and distribution platform – so hey kids, be our guest, go crazy! And they do.

I am not attempting to make a preemptive strike against TV watching here, nor do I wish to foment a TV versus social web debate – I'm far more interested in exploring the distinct differences in these mediums. The same year that Wallace wrote his essay, saw the debut of the [NCSA Mosaic](#) web browser. [Marc Andreessen](#), who led that development team, went on to start [Netscape](#), a company that brought us the browser of the same name, which became enormously popular and accounted for 90% of all web use at its peak. [Source: Wikipedia]

Much has unfolded since, as browser development moved through various iterative stages, yet 17 years later, many brands and their agencies still struggle to *fully* comprehend the difference between TV advertising and the strategic approach that is required to utilize the social web.

The history of the web is short, and as a modern phenomenon it has a shorter history than TV, although its initial take up rate was almost identical – [10 years to get to 80 million users](#). [The chart referenced in that link presumes the Internet became public in 1989 so it covers the decade through 1999.] Let's also remember that before TV, radio was the media of choice for receiving information, so the Internet take up rate in the decade '89 – '99 is impressive, as it was competing against a modern, built-out version of TV networks and a larger modern radio spectrum, for attention.

The Social Web

If Wallace were still alive today, he would have had an awful lot to say about the explosion of people using the Social Web. Especially when you take into consideration how in his essay, he noted that people held a lot of disdain for TV, yet they were unable to *not watch it*. He would surely have noted that the rapid rise of social networking was an ironic parallel of being unable to not watch TV, as “Wallace used many forms of irony, focusing on individuals’ continued longing for earnest, unself-conscious experience, and communication in a media-saturated society.”

Wallace wrote almost as if he were writing for the web, especially with his use of extensive footnotes – On the Charlie Rose show in 1997, [Wallace claimed](#) that the notes were used to disrupt the linearity of the narrative, to reflect his perception of reality without jumbling the entire structure. He suggested that he could have instead jumbled up the sentences, “but then no one would read it.” [Source: Wikipedia.]

As we now know, the web is anything but linear. What Wallace was attempting to achieve with his literature, the web provides immediately. Vannevar Bush [considered this promise](#) along with an explosion in knowledge in 1945, when he wrote [As We May Think](#).

The Web Is Just One Application on The Internet

One thing is also certain – the web and TV are two entirely different platform technologies. It feels odd to have to write that sentence, yet here we are on the cusp of 2010 and we still see badly executed brand campaigns online, where those inside the agencies who conceived of their client’s online campaign, appear to be convinced that web users surf the web just as they surf TV channels. They seem to forget, as Wired

Editor-In-Chief, [Chris Anderson](#), reminds us, “that the Internet is the once-a-century invention. The Web is just one application upon it. There are, and will be, others.” Application, medium, platform, there is much that is constantly shifting on the current application medium, the web. And as [Marshall McLuhan said](#) – “The medium is an environment that produces effects.” He suggests in a TV medium, that it’s the television circuits, screen etc. that are the ad coaxing us to buy. In 2009 that means it’s the bits, bytes and code that are tantalizing us online...that may be as close to TV as the web gets.

Here’s an extract from an academic paper titled [Internet Users and TV Audiences](#):
“What needs to be considered is **how users conceive and use the medium**. Because the decision to adopt a medium is **dependent on users, not on the functions in the medium**, therefore, we need to **focus on perceptions and actual uses of it.**”
Before embarking on any online effort, clients should be in a position to ask hard questions of their advertising or marketing agency, because what’s being said here is that strategy should be based on actual user experience, not on presumed or expected use. There is no “build it and they will come” on the web.

We need someone with Wallace’s insightful genius to write E Unibus Plurum;
Advertising, Marketing and the Social Web.

How We Watch Now

Although we clearly understand the Internet and its millions of web sites many of which contain myriad social web tools, as an interactive experience, there is a great deal of watching going on. Interaction is not a level playing field, just like the web itself. When we see numbers, such as [Facebook](#) having 350+ million members, those numbers can

conjure up images of a teeming super-city or ant colony seething with action, but what of those who stand on the perimeter peering in? Who sees the watchers? David Foster Wallace wrote back in 1993 of “....television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat.” He’s referring to the watchers and the watched and their disdain for TV, and how “irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective,” and yet they also create “despair and stasis in U.S. culture....”

People may have disdain for TV but they can’t, or couldn’t, not watch it. We can now paraphrase Wallace’s phrase as so “.....the social web whose weird pretty hand has **your/our generation by the throat.**” The difference being, the watchers and re-purposers are now in control. A new generation of digital youth has all web-posted-content by the throat. The web’s advantage is that the barrier to entry for any young, budding content provider is zero, and the content they post or appropriate can easily be repurposed for sharing or for personal use.

This is why advertisers and marketers get it badly wrong when they take an offline campaign and attempt to repurpose it for the web. They consider all those eyeballs online as a mass market that can be engaged by the classic PR control model of one-to-many messaging. They fail to understand that on the web control is almost impossible because of its open nature, and that the only thing that’s scarce in that “mass market,” is attention. Repurposing of content is analogous to what would happen if reality TV show participants had the gall to hijack the show’s cameras and production and make **a real reality show..**

White Noise – Don DeLillo

And then we get to this, where analog crashes and hits a wall – the one way street, the one to many, the shared moment and the illusions that surround that moment, in a public place – The Most Photographed Barn in America. Consider this passage [as Wallace did] from Don DeLillo's [White Noise](#) [1985]:

“Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove 22 miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted 5 signs before we reached the site.... We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides – pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

“No one sees the barn,” he said finally. A long silence followed. “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.” He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others. “We’re not here to capture an image. We’re here to maintain one. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies?” There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.

“Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of

a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.” Another silence ensued. “They are taking pictures of taking pictures.” What Wallace sees in this passage is – “....not only are people watching a barn whose only claim to fame is being an object of watching, but the pop-culture scholar Murray is watching people watch a barn, and his friend Jack is watching Murray watch the watching, and we readers are pretty obviously watching Jack the narrator watch Murray watching, etc....”

Irony and parody are at work here. Murray is trying to analyze why people give in to the “collective vision” of “mass images” [all those photographs of the same barn,] while we understand that those images became “mass” because they were made the objects of “collective vision,” via the audience. What happens when THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA gets its own [Flickr account](#)? Or maybe a Facebook Page. Online it would become THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA, LOOKED AT BY THE MOST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO HAVE NEVER SEEN THE REAL, MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA, NOR EVER TAKEN A PHOTOGRAPH OF IT..... This borders on cultural irony, which I would say gets to be less than pretty.

The Archbishop of Westminster and the Dehumanizing of Community Life – Misunderstanding Social Networks

This essay had been in the works for some months, in a form that consisted of piles of books building up on my dining table, all with pieces of torn paper stuffed into various passages, along with copious notes scribbled non-sequentially in my notebook – in other words it was going nowhere fast. Yet it was a post on his blog, [This Is Violence](#), by

my friend and business partner at [Fight](#), Justin Spohn, that spurred me to make an attempt at finishing it.

Justin wrote of this – “.... I bring this up in response to several articles about or around [Vincent Nichols](#), the Archbishop [of Westminster - Edit D.A.], who recently described the social web as leading to “transient relationships”, “dehumanizing” community life and, causing a general loss of “social skills”. His commentary came up after the suicide of [Megan Gillan](#) who overdosed on sleeping pills after being bullied on the [social network Bebo](#). What’s troubling to me though about the Archbishop’s position, and those that support him, is that by focusing on the social network specifically, or the web broadly, they’re hoisting up a convenient straw-man at the expense of actually helping anyone while trying to tear down a [edit] major support system for a lot of people.”

What happened here is the Archbishop and his supporters railed against an artificial landscape, a city without walls that they perceived as an “institution.” They have no understanding that an online social networking platform only exists because of the people who gather there. Bebo can’t be burned like a heretic at the stake. Ironically, as he wasn’t a member of the Bebo online community, the Archbishop’s offline bully pulpit messages went unheard there.

The Watchers.

The web allows us to participate whilst remaining alone. In a response to Justin’s post, one woman wrote – “I’m an introverted extrovert. I’ve built better, real life relationships faster with Social Media. There will always be a group that demonizes the change because they stand to lose control of the message and control of the relationships. No more country club.... now it’s twitter.”

Think about that – she’s saying the social web allows her to act faster and take better control of her relationships, while those that criticize her ability to be a member of the social web are being tossed out of the country club! [Country Club is such a stinging analogy too, as it conjures up images of all-white men denying access to not only people of color, but women too.] The Archbishop is the head of his country’s religious ‘Country Club’ and he fears change so he must demonize “it.” Unfortunately for him there is no substantial “it.” As Justin wrote, the Archbishop hoisted a convenient straw man to no avail.

Technology Shortens The Distance between Us, Anthropology Does The Rest

That female commenter would have been a perfect participant in a recent Pew Internet Study – [Social Isolation and New Technology](#), that finds, contrary to previous reports, “... ownership of a mobile phone and participation in a variety of internet activities are associated with larger and more diverse core discussion networks.” And, “When we examine people’s full personal network – their strong ties and weak ties – internet use in general and use of social networking services such as Facebook in particular are associated with having a more diverse social network. Again, this flies against the notion that technology pulls people away from social engagement.”

The social web is a safe place to sit back and watch, listen, hear and then reach out; it allows the Watcher to participate safely and take steps toward community. The opposite of life, interrupted. The social web is all-inclusive as it requires participation; it removes barriers to entry, it is not regimented, it is amorphous and flexible and is colorblind.

David Foster Wallace tackled Watchers in his essay, when he wrote – “Fiction writers as a species tend to be oglers...[edit]..Fiction writers watch other humans sort of the way

gapers slow down for car wrecks: they covet a vision of themselves as witnesses. But fiction writers tend at the same time to be terribly self-conscious.”

Wallace, describing how fiction writers operate, focused on those he knew; they were all under 40 [at the time] and American. He wondered if those writers watched more or less television than the average American – six hours a day in 1993. Wallace went beyond his writer subjects and singled out ordinary people who loathe to be watched, but love to watch people; Joe Briefcase as he called the male version. Joe B he said, “chooses to sit out the enormously stressful U.S. game of appearance poker.” He wrote those lines in 1993 in a TV context. Today, switching formats, the social web is a tremendous modern haven for those Watchers, let’s call them Joe and Jill Laptop. The parallels become obvious but again, TV and the web are two very different platform technologies.

Jumping ahead in the essay we find Wallace turning to postmodern literature and its embrace of “television and metawatching as themselves valid subjects.” By this he means that literature “...[locates]...its commentary on/response to a U.S. culture more and more of and for watching, illusion and the video image.” He used as an example [Stephen Dobyns’](#) 1980 poem “Arrested Saturday Night” -

This is how it happened: Peg and Bob had invited Jack and Roxanne over to their house to watch TV, and on the big screen they saw Peg and Bob, Jack and Roxanne watching themselves watch themselves on progressively smaller TVs...

And also [Bill Knott’s](#) 1983 “Crash Course” -

I strap a TV monitor on my chest
so that all who approach can see themselves
and respond appropriately.

The Repurposers

Those poems explained Wallace's idea of Watchers back in 1993, and how those that wrote about culture wrote for those who didn't realize they enjoyed "watching, illusion and the video image." Within that decade the social web had brought us the Repurposers; those who after watching, take interactive content, repurpose it and send it back out to be watched or heard, where it's repurposed and sent back out ad infinitum.

Unlike TV watching, use of the social web is not an antidote to the workday – it is part of the workday and beyond. And it is constantly evolving – unlike television.

Conclusion

If this were a novel, we would now have reached the denouement, otherwise known as – "the final resolution of the main complication." Unfortunately, in this case, the plot only continues to thicken; the web as a software application on the Internet is such a young medium yet it feels like it's been around forever. We talk now of 'digital campaigns,' 'viral videos,' 'social media campaigns,' 'social business,' and more, and we seem to have been talking in these sound bites for more than a decade – and to what end? Surely not the 1.48 million Google results for the [Domino's Pizza video?](#) Or the [Saatchi and Saatchi Toyota social media disaster?](#)

The web will always bite back. TV campaigns create a warm, fuzzy feeling for brands and their advertising and marketing agencies, because they can control the media buy and the message. Just like good old-fashioned PR, TV advertising is “Everything on our terms” basically. On the web, the watchers and the repurposers destroy that conceit.

There is no longer a one-to-many corral, no more gate-keeping, no hopper to funnel the message through. No, here’s the message from social web users - **your brand content is now my content, and as a brand you’d better curate amazing content for me to interact with or I’m outta here...**

In 2010, aligning a brand strategy with the social web still requires a serious change in another institutional problem area – [the curse of knowledge](#). I don’t believe it’s hyperbole to suggest that everything about advertising online requires advertisers and marketers forgetting what they *think* they know. For instance, Rishad Tobaccowala who heads up [Denuo](#) [apparently that's Latin for Anew..] asks this question – “**Why is marketing considered an expense? Why is it not an asset?**” That simple twist upends and challenges normal, everyday thinking in the brand and advertising world, and is the kind of questioning around brand strategy that will be required in the next decade. It’s worth watching this [7 minute video](#) of Tobaccowala discussing brand issues and the Internet.

Postscript

A couple of months ago, when this essay was originally titled ‘Landscape and Memory – The Social Web and The Watchers’ and was focused upon our sense of ‘space’ in nature and the social web, I reached out to a few friends who I considered original thinkers, to help me break the logjam that this piece had become. I received many great

responses, for which I am very grateful, urging me to follow my original line of thinking, but I felt that I was on the wrong path. It took [Roy Christopher](#) and [Justin Spohn](#) to help me find the right fork in the road. Here's their input:

From Roy -

Dave, I've been writing in tangential trajectories (I have a 'The Medium Picture' chapter-in-the-works on space as well, which discusses desire lines, the social construction of space, technologies that make spatial decisions for us, etc.). "The Most-Photographed Barn" passage is paramount. To me photography is largely a context-removing enterprise, but iterative photographing is something else. It's not quite filmic, but it implies a different context, perhaps one of a second order. Good job pulling together the homologies of Gray, Wallace, and DeLillo. The Spectacle is definitely at work here: layers and layers of watching and being watched. I'm not sure where you want this to conclude — or if you do?

-royc.

From Justin [with some editing..]

What I find interesting about your post, and the material you source for it, is how much it focuses on the circular relationship of message (or message creator) and observer (or watcher as the case may be,) and how that relates to the brand/customer relationship in the digital space. I think in the end – that's the thing that continues to stymie traditional ad agencies.

There is that debate that came up a month or so ago about [who holds the future traditional or digital agencies?](#). Unfortunately the entire argument was about the ability to execute advertising better, and the argument is still centered around who can deliver the best campaign. What your essay points out, and what your sources support, is the

concept that there is something bigger at play and that the internet is much more than a new channel.

What's needed is an understanding, not simply of the technology of the internet, but of the societal impact that this technology brought about. Before the digital revolution, the ability to create a message was in the hands of those with the financial and technical access to mass media. The internet has obviously changed that, but with that change came a change in the relationship between people and the role and ability of the individual within society. More than imparting the ability for everyone to become a broadcaster, the internet has enabled people to connect, and to organize, and to understand things in a way never before possible. It allows us to have multiple, simultaneous modes of ourselves: me the worker, me the photographer, me the Facebook friend, me the twitter account about 80's sitcoms; and have each of these modes come in and out of play asynchronously to my physical reality. Mobile takes this a step further by bringing the relationship of both time and space into this equation. I used this Tobaccowala quote [in my mobile deck](#), and I think it applies here:

“Where you are will increasingly define who you are.”

I think this is relevant to your piece in that it acknowledges the notion of the shifting persona. Previously, the most progressive of agencies would develop a series of personas and create programs targeting them. Going forward I think these personas will need to be informed by the notion that any individual may hold a number of personas at any given time: creator, customer, conversationalist, and so on; and create systems that target not just who, but who plus when and where.

Another key idea that I think is present implicitly, if not explicitly, is the concept of meaning. This is also something I talked about in my mobile deck, and something I want to bring up at [Engage 2010](#). **This is where the SEO agencies of the world may find their end if they can't adapt.** With traditional mass media, simply creating the data, in that case data being the message, was difficult. The web changed all that. Making data became easy, everyone was doing it, and what was needed was something to add some layer of structure to the soup of data. This is where search came in, answering the question "how do I find the data I want in this sea of random bits?" With that, SEO came to be based on the traditional mass media proposition that exposure to the message is THE critical component to the brand/customer equation. What we're finding now is a repeat of what happened before: **finding data is now easy but finding meaning within that data has become hard.**

Take Yelp for example. If I'm in Manhattan, and I search for Indian food I will get dozens of results, and each of those results will have been reviewed by maybe dozens of people, none of whom I know. So what I'm left with is tons of data, all of which is very easy to access, but little in the way of meaning. Instead, what I might do is call up Joe Stewart, let him know where I am, that I'm tired and grungy from walking around all day, and would like a good Indian meal but also don't have a lot of cash on me. He can take that, along with his knowledge of me based on our friendship and know right where to send me. This is the new challenge for brands. Message creation is simple, leading people to your brand is simple, but helping to understand what your brand means in the context of where and when they are. **That's the key and THAT's the level of understanding agencies have no time for.**

The Inspiration

The authors and the books from which I have culled ideas for this essay are as follows: Simon Schama's epic book, [Landscape and Memory](#) [1995,] in which he forges a new path into how we perceive history vis á vis nature; David Foster Wallace's essay, [E Unibus Plurum; Television and U.S. Fiction](#) [1993] on how television is an incredible gauge of the generic and how that affects new fiction writing; John Gray's, [Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions](#) [2004,] particularly his essay, The Society of the Spectacle Revisited, in which he posits how famous people, particularly English politicians, recycle their life experiences into commodities and sell them to a public hungry for the vicarious intimacy that comes from self-exposure in the mass media; Wim Wenders' [The Act of Seeing](#) [1992] and Don DeLillo's [White Noise](#) [1985.] Finally, Julian Barnes', [Nothing To Be Frightened Of](#) [2008,] in which he considers his atheism and later, agnosticism, as he considers what it is to die, [hint: put stress on the word nothing in the book's title, then pause before continuing.]

This essay is an extension of [one I wrote in 2008](#) about anthropology and the social web.

Related link: [Real Time Opportunities for Marketers](#).

Dave Allen: January 2010