

INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW

The increasing rate of technological innovation provides a myriad of website options for users across the globe. Unfortunately, with the development of technology, access, in terms of comprehension and acquisition of physical artifacts, is not guaranteed. Technology professionals, such as web designers, are charged with the task of learning and keeping up-to-date on the latest technologies. However, web designers are not, in many ways the people most apt to benefit from the use of new technology. It is their job to act as mediators between the technology and client - in the case of this thesis, nonprofits.

For those nonprofits dependent on web designers or technology volunteers and donations, aid is often given in the form of computer hardware or basic website design without much thought to future implications. The above individuals often fail to acknowledge the lack of existing networks of relations and systems of thought in place to support the use of such technologies. This is most prominently reflected in the notion of the “digital divide”, wherein technology access has been popularized as relating to artifacts such as computer hardware, software and Internet, rather than to the structures needed to support the use of any given technology. This definition also fails to acknowledge variability amongst its users in aptitude, educational resources and necessity for particular technologies (i.e. Internet access via mobile versus desktop) (Warschauer 2002). The realization of the unsuitability of the phrase “digital divide” and need for expansion of the term “access” beyond computer hardware, has led to the reconceptualization of incongruent technology access for marginalized groups

to enfranchise these wider concepts¹ (Barzilai-Nahon 2006, Mehra et al. 2004, Nardi & O'Day 1999, Tibben 2007, Van Dijk & Hacker 2000, Warschauer 2002, Yu 2006).

Simultaneously changing with technological innovation is the use of new methods in the technology industry that instruct web designers on the importance of understanding and communicating with their client and end-user. One such methodology, user-experience design, utilizes design ethnography as a means of increasing the transparency of the design processes and introducing research methods such as participant observation for greater contextual understanding of technology use and implementation.

As for advances in technology itself, there are now options for website development that allow the user to maintain their site without having to be skilled in code or design. Wordpress, the free software utilized for this thesis, is one such advancement.

Still, with these new methods and available technology, web designers and small scale nonprofit organizations desiring to increase their technical independence, continue to face difficulties in constructing a website that they can maintain by themselves.

AIM and RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through Niklas Luhmann's systems theory in combination with actor-network theory I aim to look first at the systems in which nonprofits and web designers separately operate; how their processes are altered with the introduction of design ethnography and Wordpress; and finally which human and nonhuman actors are utilized in the creation of a website that is successful and sustainable.

This thesis will be directed by the following research questions:

- How does the functionality and community of Wordpress affect the nonprofit's use and understanding of a website?

¹ See Chapter 2 for further discussion.

- In what ways can design ethnography both educate members of, and alter, the client – web designer relationship in small scale nonprofit projects?
- What web designer and nonprofit goals and perceptions of self, impede technology acquisition?
- Upon containment by encompassing social systems, where do the relationships between human and nonhuman actors convene or diverge to produce the sustainable use of a technology?

METHODS, JUSTIFICATION and FIELD SITE

As an individual trained in web design and anthropology researching others in the same fields, I am considered to be an “insider” or “native” anthropologist by the discipline of anthropology. While I do not want to presuppose the necessity of a dialectic produced by thinking of oneself as an insider/outsider, as an extension of reflexivity, it is helpful in recognizing the impact of preexisting knowledge paradigms, particularly when considering how perceived divisions may influence relationships within my research (Narayan 1993). Marilyn Strathern (1987) raises an important question, broadening this matter: how does an anthropologist know when they are “at home”? She defines an anthropologist “at home” as one that is conducting auto-anthropology; “...anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it...” (1987: 17). She states that it is not enough to call oneself by the same name of the subject in question, but one must exemplify, “...the relationship between their [the anthropologist’s] techniques of organizing knowledge and how people organize knowledge about themselves” (1987: 31). Therefore, my ability to provide further knowledge about the fields of web design and design ethnography is dependent on whether or not my representation of knowledge aligns with those I aim to study. Here, Strathern differentiates between the “author” and “writer” at home: the author provides an account that can be challenged and interacted with, while the writer produces information to be discussed among colleagues (1987: 26). In the case of this study, I feel that I am an “author” at home, who has produced technical and applied anthropological

work that seeks to provide suggestions and gain feedback from the web design and anthropological fields I have researched, through the utilization of the same cultural and social means that currently produce knowledge in those communities.

As a result of this authorship comes an addition to self-knowledge in my ability to present new ideas; to 'reauthor', based on existing societal paradigms that can immediately be challenged if necessary (1987: 29). It was in fact my preexisting knowledge and skill-set, the ability to draw on, "specific techniques by which people know themselves" (1987: 30), that allowed me to conduct this research and my principal reason for utilizing participant observation as my primary research method. Participant observation allowed me to simultaneously conduct research on nonprofit client – web designer relationships and build websites for two nonprofits that lacked an online presence. My ability to reauthor framed my role in the fields of web design and anthropology and I experienced being (as Barab et al. (2004) introduces) the 'change agent', which in conjunction with participant observation, describes the goal of a particular group's transformation through the implementation of technology².

It should be emphasized then, that the creation of the nonprofits' websites were not the goal of this research but one product of my participant observation as a web designer in the nonprofit sector. In order to understand further how web designers and nonprofits react to specific web design methods, along with the impact of design ethnography and Wordpress, going through the process of web design was an essential aspect of my study. Moreover, as an applied work, and as a personal objective, this research would not have been complete without the production of websites and recommendations that could be used by the participants now and in the future.

² Barab et al.'s (2004) work is also tied to participatory design and action research which I have not discussed because it is linked to a series of stricter methods not feasible for short time spans in the web design industry, in addition to ethnography itself being participatory, reflexive and directed when paired with user-experience.

The field site in which I conducted participant observation was both on and offline. The two nonprofits I worked with as a web designer and design ethnographer were located in London, England; however, as I was based two hours away in Canterbury, England, we corresponded through online media on a regular basis. I also carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with web designers through the use of Skype³ and a very helpful call recorder that functions together with Gmail⁴. Due to the nature of their occupation, web designers are extremely technically adept; therefore, Skype proved to be a comfortable platform for all interviewees (located across the world, from Belgium to India). Nonprofit interviews were carried out in person, all taking place in London. Additionally, I am subscribed to a series of email lists (e.g. Anthrodesign⁵), a regular reader of blogs (e.g. The UX Booth⁶) and a member of Facebook groups (e.g. Nonprofit Organization⁷) that provided me with up-to-date news of the nonprofit and design industry. Finally, as a member of Meetup.com, a popular social networking site allowing all individuals interested in topics such as “nonprofit access to technology” (i.e. NetSquared London⁸) to convene at monthly meetings and networking events, I was provided an impromptu space for conversation and semi-structured interviews surrounding my research topic.

ORGANIZATION and CONTENT OF THESIS

The organization and content of this thesis has been altered for the purpose of accessibility and greater readability. This can be seen through chapter separation, writing style and inclusion of glossary and dissemination, which aim to reach the wide audience described in this interdisciplinary work.

³ A software application that allows users to make voice calls over the internet.

<http://www.skype.com/>

⁴ G Recorder for Skype - Not free software, but has free trial: http://download.cnet.com/G-Recorder-for-Skype/3000-2349_4-75115585.html?tag=mncol

⁵ <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/anthrodesign/>

⁶ <http://www.uxbooth.com/>

⁷ <http://www.facebook.com/nonprofitorgs>

⁸ <http://www.meetup.com/netsquaredlondon/>

Due to the differences in investment, interests and time restraints of this thesis' recipients, chapters have been divided in way that allows for quick recognition of contents. As an example, I have separated detailed theoretical concepts and more straightforward recommendations in their own chapters, endeavoring to section off and clearly call out my use of theory amidst other chapters, so that those desiring to read more summary-based content may easily do so. To further support this readability, I have allowed ample space for definition, either in-text or through glossary reference.

The first chapters, comprised of the *Preface*, *Introduction* and *Context*, introduce the reader to who I am as an anthropologist and member of the web design community. At this point I acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of this study and where it can be situated in the many layers of the anthropological discipline. Following is the single theoretically-heavy chapter with the self-defining title: *Nonprofit client - web designer relationships through Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Actor-network theory*. It is here I provide an overview of both theoretical frameworks in order for the reader to better conceptualize how the following four chapters and their contents are to work together in the goal of creating and maintaining a website. The four main social systems and actors that have contributed to this study are organized into the follow chapters: *Free Software and Wordpress*, *Design Ethnography*, *Nonprofit Technology Access* and *Web Designers and Workflow*. The four chapters contribute to the greater discussion of nonprofits' abilities to utilize their organizations' websites through Wordpress and design ethnography and how the client - web designer relationship functions in the nonprofit sector. The following two chapters, *Reaching a Wider Audience* and *Recommendations* respectively work to cover my intentions in posting my field notes and all research materials online and to provide straightforward recommendations for website development in the nonprofit sector.

In addition to the final document submitted to the University of Kent's Anthropology Department, all work related to this thesis, from data to full written text, is available online to support acquisition by those outside of

academia and others more acclimated to viewing and searching for information online. I also wish to support the ideals of the free software community for its values of free access, modifiability and distribution which can lead to the recursive production of higher quality work through collaboration and external editing or feedback. Wordpress is therefore the chosen platform for all websites involved in this thesis, as it is a product of and continued player in the free software community. The online distribution and free software ideals provides a space and vehicle for future feedback and critique to limit the often static quality of academic texts (see Chapter 7).

ONWARD...

The goal of this thesis is to help small scale nonprofits desiring technological self-subsistence and involved web designers to recognize that the tools and methods to collapse unequal access and utilization of technology are available, but require the correct social supports and structures to maintain their use. Therefore, it must be recognized that technology itself is an entity made up of any number of relationships that result in its creation that do not leave a website's bounds even after supposed completion. In short, the human and nonhuman actors involved in the implementation or construction of a new technology all have equal value in the attached relationships that must be sustained in order to achieve a technology's successful use. This thesis will help the reader to unravel these relationships as we move through the process of website design in the nonprofit sector with the aid of design ethnography and Wordpress.