

Interactive in the real world, what's next?

Clouds, Crowds and Brand Reality Creative: distributed creativity and information, collaborative tools and ideas.

In June 2008 Icann President Paul Twomey announced “the biggest change to the way people find each other on the internet since its inception”. Behind this hyperbole is the news that from early 2009 Icann is throwing open the way that top-level domain (“TLD”) names are administered and created. Apart from .com, .co.uk and the other familiar suffixes, people will be able to acquire .car, .insurance, .love and .hate. Names, concepts, generic words and even brands will be a new organising principle on the net.

At first only certain companies and government organisations get a stab at this potential new gold-rush, in a bid to protect intellectual property and prevent a resurgence in cyber-squatting. Indeed, some names are expected to cost in the region of £250,000. However, it is not this initial iteration that is the most potentially transforming to the way marketing and communication exists in interactive and digital spaces.

Some people fear that the list of TLD names will become endless and the net will become chaotic and disorganised. Actually, this is the barrier that we need to push through. The feared scenario in fact offers the most interesting signpost for the future.

The great potential is that the new domain system will ultimately lead to the development of addresses for information itself, rather than the current model of faux places filled with information. The potential is that it is one of the first steps to the birth of the semantic web.

the number of these “web” addresses increase then they will lose their relevance to marketing – the old “broadcast model of interactive” based around a slick microsite will become less effective¹. Traditional Browser-based web page access will become less and less dominant as information becomes more important and accessible than the old traditional data pots, pages and directories used to organise it. The first steps are already being seen with the beta release of Google’s Chrome – the browser that aims to have “one box for everything” and acknowledges that “what we really need [is] not just a browser, but a modern platform for web pages and applications.” Google has consolidated the separate search box, employed by Firefox, IE and Opera, into the main address bar. The simplification has removed the usual menu items of *File, History, Bookmarks* and so forth, which are now accessible through the address bar, by a dynamic keyword search. The result is a cleaner, more intuitive interface and the browser becomes a smarter, dynamic helper.

The future of advertising and marketing is at the new intersection of entertainment, information and utility. Advertising and marketing will live in, and function as, applications by which we access, filter and pull informa-

Evolutions of unseen, underlying technologies can often have the most fundamental long-term effects in the world of interactive and digital marketing. Seemingly unglamorous or technically obtuse changes can lead to an explosion in the possibilities of creativity and communications. If the adoption of AJAX signaled and spawned the web 2.0 boom in social networking and media – a phenomenon that has now become an accepted default state for any marketing or net experience – then perhaps the new form of a familiar fundamental points to the next great leap.

The Semantic web humanising information is more important than how you store it

“The semantic web provides a common framework that allows data to be shared and reused across application, enterprise and community boundaries” (W3C). It is a future where computers can understand the meaning of information as well as its format or type and can then serve it accordingly. It is smarter, personalised and almost infinitely granular.

In the semantic web there will be unique machine and human understood addresses for each piece and type of information. There will be countless numbers of distinct addresses available, so each thought, image, and word will have a unique address. A side effect of this is that as

tion towards us wherever we are located at any moment in time. This notion of smarter, anywhere and anytime access to information, entertainment and utility finds its current and near future realisation in the concept of the Cloud.

The Cloud distributed creativity, information and access

The Cloud is about distributing, accessing and publishing everywhere and sharing with everyone – a principle embodied by many a creative project or social media tool or site. So far so Web 2.0. Where it differs is that the audience for accessing, publishing and sharing everything includes you yourself, on any and all your devices – especially mobile ones.

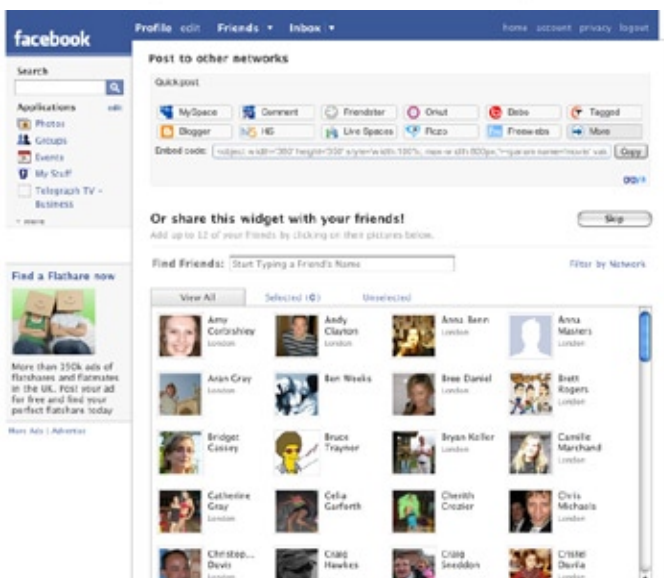
It is this proliferation of places and devices that is in turn contributing to the increased importance and influence of the information itself over the older organising technologies and access methods. We will have control rather than the applications, technologies and devices.

Cloud computing means your machine does very little except contact the internet and display information in the most appropriate fashion to the device and purpose at hand – everything is taken from applications and storage in cyberspace². This new world of the Cloud is the world enabled by WiFi rather than the old cumbersome, expensive copper wires and fibre-optics. It is not a fiction or a future, it is now - but it has happened quite quickly. In 2006 William Gibson was still using WiFi as a “science fiction trope” in his novel *Spook Country*. It was exotic. Now it is commonplace. In the last 18 months, through competition between the companies like Orange or the Carphone Warehouse, we’ve already seen that access everywhere is real – indeed I can detect 14 wireless networks, not all secure, when I’m sitting on my sofa at home.

So interactive has finally broken out and is in the real world, not just in the window that sits on your desk tied down by wires. But as we begin to interact in different



"Remember The Milk reinvents the to-do list" PCWORLD



One click sharing is an accepted norm but the places we can share with and our identities within them are multiplying. The Cloud aims to make the experience seamless and manageable.

places, we start interacting in different ways. Now interactive in reality is about the new ways of manipulating – with the emphasis on manipulate – information, services and entertainment.

So what is the reality? How does the Cloud intersect with the real world? How is it being implemented right now? Well, first we need a quick caveat from the world of *ET* and Mr Spielberg.

Eliot: *He's a man from outer space and we're taking him to his spaceship.*

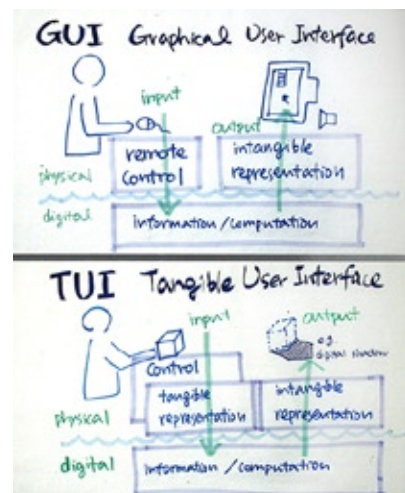
Greg: *Can't he just beam up?*

Eliot: *This is reality, Greg.*

“This is reality, Greg”, implies that reality is about limits, that the fantastic doesn't happen, that the real world is dull. Interaction design and digital technology frequently confront this issue. In fact Digital in the real world is both fantastic and dull, sometimes at the same time. At the very least it starts as fantastic, but soon becomes the norm – it alters the way we see things and relate to each other.

Digital in the world away from the desktop is not an overnight jump to flights of fantasy – to Minority Report, Tricorders and jetpacks – but equally it is not totally mundane. Designers have been exploring it from the beginning of Interaction design, with greater and lesser degrees of success.

From emotional tables that respond to the force with which you throw your keys down at the end of the day and recommend the appropriate drink, to Ars Electronica 2003's *Telelettergarten*, a building sized “keyboard” that enabled an anonymous collective of programmers and climbers to transform the “largely cerebral act of programming into a physical experience”, the move from Graphical User Interface to Tangible User Interface offers advantages for marketers beyond entertainment and being a replacement for a mouse – it changes the way people relate to their data and introduces a new playfulness.



Bill Gavers' Emotional Key Table and Picture Frame, MIT Tangible Media Group's Prof Hiroshi Ishii's original TUI diagram. MIT Tangible Media Group focuses on seamless couplings between physicality and virtuality. <http://tangible.media.mit.edu>

We already have well-integrated touch technology on consumer electronics, from Apple's multitouch devices (iTouch, MacBook Pro, the new Mac operating system), games consoles (Nintendo DS and Wii) and now even PCs and notebooks. HP has now released the TouchSmart, a desktop system with a touch interface, and in July 2008 Dell released a module to turn its Latitude XT Tablet computer into a full-blown touch-operated system. All these devices have been designed for use on the move and in the Cloud.



Aerie Networks vision of the mobile internet and broadband - circa 2002

When you are not sitting at a desk, when you are moving in the Cloud, then the keyboard, large screen and mouse are not appropriate. Interacting with the Cloud in the real world these days means using devices like the iPhone or Samsung's Omnia. It is not a hologram in the palm of your hand, or the CG silver surfer of the BT Cellnet's brave new world of WAP. It is Blackberry in Orange Shops and Argos selling Laptops for the first time because they see them as a volume product; even Acer has released its Aspire One “netbook”. The Cloud is Google's open-source web-based software and Apple's *MobileMe* service – a service that is “not up to Apple's usual standard” but still manages to achieve a 700% increase in traffic and users.

People have been proclaiming the year of mobile since the afore-mentioned ads of the early 21st century but the real uptake has happened quietly in the background. When ICM Research finds that 45% of UK mobile phone owners browse the web daily this shows that people are already interacting with the Cloud, and their number will only increase now that network operators have finally enabled ‘all you can eat’ data plans. Indeed, network operators are currently investing heavily in Cloud based services/applications and even mobile TV as future revenue streams.

By 2013 Jupiter Research estimates that 2.1 billion mobile users will be using handsets to pay for goods downloaded directly to their phones - from ringtones, music, and games to gig tickets and TV shows. So the real future of mobile content lies in useful applications or assets that can embody social “bragging rights”.



As the semantic web evolves and becomes a digital reality then it will cross over into the real world via people's need to interact with the



A possible future of mobile search

Cloud. Geolocation services such as Yahoo's FireEagle, a service that bridges the gap between traditional and mobile computing, or The Geode project for Firefox already aim to meet this need, and as they cross over into social networks to become "social compasses" they will only get more useful and more widely adopted. Only then will the potential for real world contextual creative opportunities combined with the newly accepted manipulative technologies come together to make reality more like fantasy. Then creative can start to challenge the limits of "reality, Greg".

The Crowd

Cloud linked collaborative communities, creativity and tools

What does this mean for marketers? The answer is that if you free up and increase the places and ways you can access Digital creative and communications – if you enable the Cloud – you also free up the numbers of people who have access – you enable the Crowd.

How does design and creative have to evolve to meet the needs of marketing and communication in light of the Cloud and Crowd? The principles of the semantic web point the way. The goal of the semantic web is not to make people think more like computers (the old way of web design where the user was not always right) but to make technology think more like humans – with all the quirks that this implies.

Traditional Interaction Design and creativity tends to be rooted in the Physiological and Psychological, smaller scale areas of study. The future of creativity involves moving up the approach hierarchy to focus more on Anthropology and Sociology – to embracing and understanding the way that Crowds behave and connect and then catering accordingly.

This union of the Cloud and the Crowd is the new reality of digital.

The new reality of digital is people helping to shape products and services and then trialing them digitally. The new Internet is useful and real. It is people – not computers – talking to each other, sharing information, entertainment and functionality. It is using and enabling the power of the Crowd and getting them to manipulate and process brands in a useful, productive way.

The marketing motivation behind digital in the new real world is about 'doing', about active engagement, both now and in the future. It reflects the famous Lao Tse quote:

*What I hear, I forget.
What I say, I remember.
What I do, I understand.*

And it is the embodiment of Seymour Papert's *Learning Theory of Constructionism* – the belief that people learn most effectively by doing things rather than sitting and listening – in this case applied to brand messages.



Hierarchy of design approaches, influences and areas of investigation

The blurring between the product, the social element, the interactive film, the website and the mobile application is already making the difference indistinguishable. As the Cloud grows people are interacting with all spaces. It is not new media any more, and people are coming together as Crowds. They are contributing, developing and sharing, and creative and services need to be responsive, personal, informative and fun. Future creative and marketing needs to reflect the open-source and democratic potential of the Cloud and Crowd.

“Now, people collaborate together to create software, releasing it back onto the web where it outperforms the ‘commercial’ competition. They share information about medical conditions, challenging the authority of the medical establishment. They co-operate to drive down fuel prices, publishing the cheapest price for your postcode. And they join forces to bring down brands who let them down, publishing videos of underperforming products. The age of the Trilogue has arrived”

Andrew Walmsley, *Superbrands*.

The Cloud is leading to a large range of connections within Crowds – from strong to weak. The weak connections include the direct connections with brands. The strong connections are with each other.

Online Crowds are brought together by common interests – by the niche (and not so niche) ideas and content that they can consume, manipulate and/or contribute. Ask what binds them and it is behaviours and attitudes not ages and incomes. These are the strong connections that technology – and the Cloud – has enabled.

The challenge is how do we make the weak connections stronger and how do we let them have a positive effect on the connected Crowd?

One possible answer is that in this world Brand creative needs to become *Brand Reality Creative*.

**Brand Reality Creative
Breaking away from
the objective correlative
in advertising and interactive.**

Traditional advertising and marketing communications are frequently based on the concept of the *objective correlative*⁴ – where an object or person (signifier) represents a value or function that is transferred to the product or service (signified). The link between the product/service and the signifier does not have to be a literal or strong one but the “objective correlative, with its own logic that bonds so well with subjective work [makes] the connections

seem plausible, even self-evident”⁵. Because the Crowd’s connection with brands is inherently weak we need creative actually to become the connection. As David Searls once said, “There is no market for messages.” This is Brand Reality Creative, where useful, usable and delightful interaction engages the Crowd and helps them connect, either functionally or for the purpose of self-actualisation across both real and digital spaces.

Brand Reality Creative has the value exchange firmly in the favour of the user. When applied to online advertising it should lead to semantic windows on personally relevant content and live, real events and features. Interactive creative is not inherently interesting because it is digital, it is interesting because it can provide a way for real people to connect and do things together – social networking was just the village pump on a global scale where we used social media and applications to present aspects of our real or imagined personalities. Reality and content will be sought after and valued by Crowds, and online advertising needs to evolve to account for this or else it will be filtered out and switched off. It needs to be valuable in itself and get people closer to content and reality.

Brand Reality Creative ties in with the post credit crunch desire or need for tangible value over slick expensive fictions. Traditional object correlative advertising masking underperforming or non-useful products/services is sub-prime. Brand Reality Creative’s goal is to do something useful, helpful and valuable – to show not tell and embody the brand in the process.

“People won’t buy brands as entertainment, they want products that entertain. Brands will need to be something people connect with and will want to engage with”⁶, something that does something for them rather than interrupts them. It does not have to rely on a blatant do X and get Y message. It can rely upon people’s natural curiosity.



CNN.com’s *T-Shirt Headlines Project* used small T-Shirt icons next to headlines to draw peoples’ attention to their improved video offer. Clicking on the icon would lead them to a custom t-shirt shop where they could purchase a t-shirt with the headline on it. The shirts were emblazoned with the “I just saw it on CNN.com” tagline, along with the date and time of the headline. People could choose shirts with headlines they liked, were appalled about, found surreal, or just whimsical by actually interacting with the videos. It also spread the wider word as people wore the shirts, gifted them to their friends or broadcasted their purchase on their *Facebook* News Feed.

Brand Reality Creative like this is organic not viral, it has more usage loops and can be used by people for self-representation. It nurtures and incentivises invites

and it cares about the retention rate rather than chasing installs through brute force. It is not the archetypal one hit widget - the type that cluttered up your old Facebook Profile page, the Viral App that is essentially spam. However, it is not just about *Brand Utility*.

The theory of *Brand Utility* arose in 2006 from the desire of agencies like *Barbarian Group* and *Anomaly* for the valuable communities, sites and experiences they create for clients to live beyond the average three month marketing campaign’s lifecycle. Soon it became the belief that brands should be “genuinely useful to their customers, employees, suppliers and the people they touch”⁷. Since then it has become a cliché to mention brand utility and Nikeplus in the same breath. Much comment has been made about this technological partnership between Nike and Apple since its revolutionary debut. The great combination of a useful training tool with sharing personal performance and comparing runs embodies Crowd focused brand utility. Yet it is Nikeplus’ recent evolution to form the heart of the *Human Race 10k* that transforms the campaign to one of Brand Reality Creative. Effectively “it’s translating...intangible propositions into the result of something more basic and useful for society [rather than] just advertising through a medium the individual can use to make it less interrupting”⁸. The creative is a useful embodiment of the brand that affects the real world, not a metaphor or a distraction. It is not a tool with a logo either.

In its ultimate form Brand Reality Creative needs to offer an experience you can’t get anywhere else. People will pay for things that they see as scarce, not things – digital versions - that they see as intangible and abundant. The digital element has to do more or be used for more. This has been the dilemma facing the music, game and film industries, indeed anyone involved in the creation of the new digital currency – content. The music industry, of all the content creation industries, has reacted to recent advances in the connectivity of Crowds as a threat rather than an opportunity. For every claimed “MyTube/YouSpace” basement success story, the major labels have seem to have ten lawyers with a handful of writs. Instead, it has been left to music’s actual practitioners, grass-roots movements and technology firms like Apple to forge the new business models for the Cloud and Crowd enabled world.

In October 2007 the band Radiohead shocked the music industry almost as much as the birth of Napster when their self-released album *In Rainbows* was sold online for only as much as people were willing to pay for it. Their digital honesty box confronted one of the downsides of the Crowd – intellectual property theft over file-sharing and peer-to-peer networks – while also generating a huge volume of PR and media attention. The digital version

was effectively free but the real, enhanced physical boxed set retailed for £40. The experiment only lasted for 3 months and sales allegedly averaged £2 confirming that consumers, while valuing content, were not prepared to pay the old prices for purely digital copies. When something is “free” it is hard to go back to paying – ironically this situation is probably the ultimate end result of the industry’s own debasing of its currency via years of cover-mounts and newspaper giveaways.

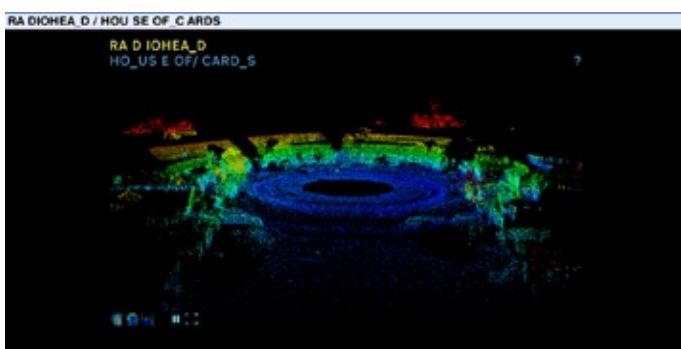
Radiohead’s experiment altered the industry so much that nine months later Prince conducted the physical release of his new album free through the *Daily Mail*. What Radiohead started, Prince took to the next level by ushering in a new era of business models based on brand association, product placement and live experiences; an era of brands supplying tangible access to content in return for Crowd engagement.

However, the new model does not mean that brands have to give the Crowd everything and expect nothing in return. Brands can use the Crowd creatively.



Licensing/brand association, a future content business model

Once again one of the best example of using the Crowd to generate content comes from the Radiohead stable. After the initial PR success of the *In Rainbows* launch came the second phase of the campaign: promoting individual singles. Because the band was not signed to a major label they could not rely upon the traditional methods of single promotion – methods similar to those employed by the average fmcg launch – repetitive, expensive exposure of the message/music until it becomes engraved in the audience’s mind and they cave in and buy. Instead, they launched an remix competition - *Nude ReMix*. While net remix competitions are not new, indeed through projects like *Looplabs* or even technical mashups they are actually an ingrained part of internet culture, *Nude ReMix* was smarter. It was done where the audience was – on iTunes and on their Facebook pages - so it felt open and natural. It didn’t exist solely as a self-contained, controlled, exclusive product driven website where everything was approved by the brand team and compliance. The useful parts of the track (stems) were sold - SOLD - for self-assembly on iTunes and people could use their Facebook pages to distribute their work and gain votes.



House of Cards motion capture data visualisation

The campaign to promote the next single *House of Cards* went even further into this world of open-sourced Crowd creativity when instead of releasing a video the band released the motion capture data of a performance. The data was then turned into beautiful visualisations – Crowd created music videos – using open-source techniques and languages like Processing.

At the end of these campaigns the Crowd had created experiences that could never have been created by a traditional marketing campaign. They had generated networked exposure⁹ through creative interactions that gave value to digital versions of the real product.

The Crowd based Brand Reality Creative approach also allows effects to last longer and achieve more long-term reach than the “average three month marketing campaign”. After the *Nude ReMix* campaign had officially ended its influence re-emerged in the form of James Houston’s *Big Ideas (Don’t Get Any)*. This film of a real installation transformed the act of remixing into an art piece that married analogue and digital technologies and took the internet by storm. His reprocessed Crowd piece actually transcended the original and truly embodied the Reader Response Theory that brands are ultimately made by people. Essentially *Product + Story + Audience + Context =*

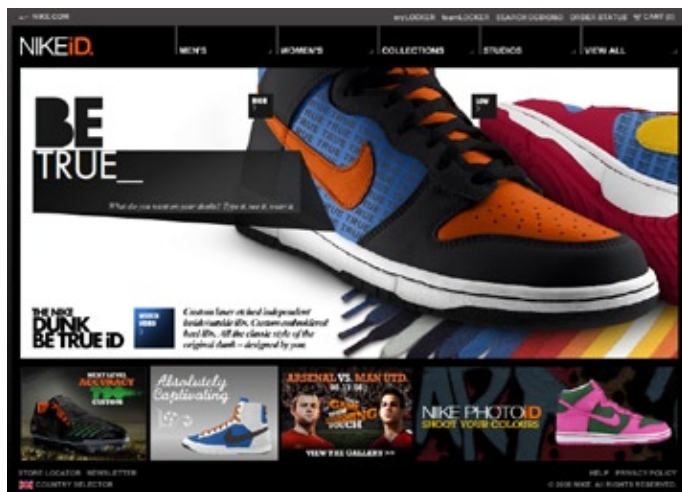
*Content*¹⁰, or in this case art, proving that “content is the new democracy and we the people, are ensuring that our voices are heard”¹¹.

Despite the obvious quality and success of these examples of Crowd reprocessed creativity it is important to recognize that they are still quite “niche”. The traffic, interactions and attention generated were high but the Crowd communities were still relatively specialised. How do we break away from highly technical/creative audiences and take a broadcast approach to Crowd creation and Brand Reality Creative?

In fact this has already been happening. While the *Nikeplus* campaign mentioned previously may embody Brand Utility, 2005’s NikeID campaign, where interactively customising the product became entertainment, truly embodies Crowd enabled Brand Reality Creative. As part of the campaign Nike launched an interactive billboard experience that let people use their phones to design a shoe on the Reuters sign in Times Square. Passersby could use their phones to interact with the 23-story billboard, customising and even directly purchasing their own Nike shoe. After designing a shoe on the screen, the user received a text message within seconds. That message contained mobile phone wallpaper showing their shoe along with a link to the *NikeID* site where they could buy it. People could also create and share their designs in online adverts and on the *NikeID* site itself. *NikeID* now forms a central part of the Nike’s overall strategy.



James Houston's *Big Ideas (Don't Get Any)*



Brand Reality Creative is not limited to so-called “cool”, media or high-tech brands. A similar success story to the Radiohead or *NikeID* examples is the *Lego Factory*, an interactive campaign where people can digitally design their own custom creations, share them, discuss them and then order the parts and their own personalized packaging. Crowd based Brand Reality Creative like this, not constricted UGC upload your photo competitions, work on an open, simple mechanic (even/especially if the techniques required are quite specialist) and work with existing communities to drive involvement and the quality of entries. This in turn drives exposure and direct and indirect sales.

“...a sports shoe, a toy. Each has empowered a community of its consumers, and by connecting them together has itself benefited. But these aren’t ‘soft’ [brand] benefits. They’re driving revenue streams, repeat purchase and real engagement – consumer relationships whose strength is founded not on the transient moment of product need, but in the enduring nature of humans as social animals.”

Andrew Walmsley, *Superbrands*.

The potential of Brand Reality Creative for the Cloud and Crowd enabled world is immense but we do need a word of warning before storming this “new utopia”. While it is said that there is wisdom in crowds, the Crowd can easily become a mob. There are already instances of bloggers stopping writing because of over-democracy, because of people hiding behind usernames to flame and indulge in petty arguments. The risk is that sometimes in a crowd no one can hear you scream because everyone is screaming. The Crowd is people – we all got the “brands need to be like people and marketing is now a conversation” memo – and people can be downright ugly. People do not

always act with the purest intentions, and the market does not always self-regulate, the great fact you Googled in support of your argument can always turn out to be the fantasy of a teenager from Tipton, something the phenomenally successful *Loose Change* conspiracy theory film proved. Equally, if an online newspaper were to be generated solely out of most viewed stories it would be overflowing with kittens, sexual accidents and pictures of Britney with no underwear. The next big challenge is how to manage masses of information, how to attribute identity, and how to work out what is truth and what is propaganda – or worse the Big Lie?

The birth of the semantic web touched on at the beginning of this paper, and a new focus on developing filters and aggregators, means we can start addressing these risks of digital fatigue and noise. The issues of identity and authority in crowds are already reflected in projects like *OpenID* and the move from the freewheeling *Wikipedia* to Google's editor influenced *Knol*. Marketers and communicators need to support and engage with this future if they are going to continue to have any influence.

Brand Reality Creative for the Cloud and Crowd world is just one technique that Brands can use to become a way for people to sort the wheat from the chaff. Ultimately, our job should be to make the Cloud and Crowd work for humanity rather than debase it.

David J Carr, 1st September 2008

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Group clients include Orange, Aviva (Norwich Union, Norwich Union Life & RAC), Diageo, Unilever, Transport for London, Emirates, Toshiba, COI, The Design Council, Avaya and SCA Hygiene.

¹ Flo Heiss, *The way I see it*

² It is even a possible future for Nicholas Negroponte's XO laptop – the OLPC project – that aims to bridge the digital divide and enable the real Crowd. The whole OLPC project could effectively live in the Cloud.

³ It will take until analogue switch off in 2012 to leave room for the UHF frequency needed, but in the States the average subscription length is 2.5 months – people leaving as soon as they join – so this passive Cloud model may need deeper examining.

⁴ *"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is evoked."*T.S. Eliot, 1919

⁵ *"The bottle that isn't there and the duck that can't be heard: The subjective correlative in commercial messages"* Michael Witoski, University of South Carolina

⁶ Flo Heiss, *The way I see it*

⁷ Johnny Vulkan, *Anomaly*

⁸ Bram De Maesschalck - *PSFK*

⁹ *"Driven by internet and mobile communications, networks are turning into the major means of doing business... Simply put, networks will make the world go round. So controlling the networks of this world will soon count for more than controlling the capital."* Netocracy, by Jan Söderqvist & Alexander Bard

¹⁰ Ian Tait, *Crackunit*

¹¹ Brian Solis