



Putting the “Social” in Media

Interview with [Alexandra Samuel](#), Director of the [Social + Interactive Media Centre](#)
Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver, BC

For podcast release
Monday, October 25, 2010

Q: Is culture a community or a personal asset? In our day, how you answer may depend on whether you are a consumer or a creator. Hello, this is Chris Kenneally at Copyright Clearance Center. We’re thinking today about the impact of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media applications on the business of writing and publishing. Web 2.0 has brought a more interactive relationship between creating and consuming content than ever seen before. That interaction is shaping our lives and changing our media in fascinating and sometimes threatening ways. Joining me from Vancouver to talk about the economic and the ecology of social media is Alexandra Samuel, Director of the Social and Interactive Media Center at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Alexandra, welcome to Beyond the Book.

A: Thanks so much for having me, Chris.

Q: Well, it’s terrific to have you join us today and I wanted to start by asking you about this very interesting research life you have, which is specifically about social media. Do you think of yourself in a way as a kind of 21st century anthropologist?

A: (laughter) Sometimes I fear I’m a 22nd century anthropologist, born a little too early. It just seems like so much of what we study, for those of us who do research on the internet, is about where we’re going rather than where we are and very little about where we’ve been. And I say that I’ve been doing research on the internet since 1996. That’s when I was in the middle of doing a PhD in Political Science and decided I wanted to work on the internet and most of what I was excited about then still hasn’t happened yet. So I think that when you look at what is happening to social media in any field, you realize that we’re at the beginning, very, very beginning of a revolution, and what is coming is much bigger than what we’re dealing with today.

Q: Well, right, and we are, meaning all of us on this planet, taking a journey that we don’t know the destination for. It’s rather strange. It’s kind of getting in a plane and not sure where the heck it’s bound.



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- A: That's right, and it's funny when you think about the publishing world specifically, I actually feel like a lot of the roadmaps we have are from books. They're from fiction, right? They're from all these incredible dystopic science fiction novels that tell us about how dehumanized we'll be when we spend our lives plugged into the network and what we don't have are the roadmaps of how this could actually work out OK, and that's probably because it doesn't make as good a novel, but I think that's the work that I feel like I'm trying to do and a lot of my colleagues are trying to do, is help people make sense of how they can use social media in a way that's positive for their lives, for their work, for their businesses, for their creative expression, and whether we're working with filmmakers or industrial design companies, that's fundamentally the problem we're helping them grapple with is how do you live in the future?
- Q: Right, and let's just zero in on what you are doing there at the Emily Carr University. There's this Social and Interactive Media Center, which as far as I can tell is a reasonably new outfit there, but you are expressly trying to work with local companies in British Columbia to help them understand these issues. So this is not simply research, pure and simple. This is research for kind of practical application.
- A: That's right, and it's an interesting center because it was created last year by a grant from NCIRC (sp?) which is kind of the Canadian equivalent of the National Science Foundation in the United States and what's interesting about that is for a scientific grant maker to fund an art university is an unusual situation and what it recognizes, I think, is that a lot of the innovation that actually drives businesses forward is not fueled as much by incremental scientific innovation as by giant leaps forward in creative thinking, and of course that's what you get when you work with artists and designers, if you have that opportunity to find that kind of breakthrough that takes your company in a new direction. And so when we're working with companies here in BC, we're really trying to help them find that next opportunity.
- So for example, I'm working with a film company that's one of the most successful broadcast producers in Canada, Paperny Films, and the whole structure of Canadian broadcast funding has changed in the past few years and it's now pretty much a requirement for most funding programs to have a significant new media component and so we're helping them think about what does it mean to think about your work as a storyteller, not just in terms of one medium, the medium of television, but in terms of integrating that experience with what people do online now because so much of the television is experience is social. It's people Tweeting or Facebooking while they're watching their shows.
- Q: What's interesting about that is the way that many people thought that one or the other was going to kill the other side. So by that, I mean that television watching



would kind of fall away because of greater social media consumption, but in fact, they're now happening simultaneously and each is growing.

- A: Yeah. The specifics of TV relative to internet seem to vary from study to study, and I've seen studies that show that people are just doing a lot of multitasking, you know, multi-screen consumption simultaneously, and I've seen studies that show that especially in younger demographics, there is actually a bit of a diminishing in terms of TV consumption relative to social media and on gaming in particular. What I find interesting myself, my favorite study on this is this terrific study that was done at Ball State where they actually logged about 800 days with different regular folks, watching how they used screens, and you really learn a lot about how television and screens and mobile fit into people's lives and how much of it is happened at the same time and I think for television producers and other kinds of content producers, it points the way to the opportunity and also the danger of our new online lives.

If you regard social media as the enemy or the competition, and you try and push it to the margins, then you're going to lose your audience share to either other platforms because people want to be participating and engaging in recreational activities that actually connect them with their friends, whether that's gaming over the Xbox over a network, or just chatting with their friends on Facebook, and the other possibility is you're going to lose the market share to other producers for your platform, other TV shows that are successful in creating a Twitter back channel during the show, so that the audience can talk to the show's stars about what's going on or creating a related presence on Foursquare as Bravo has done, and they have this thing with their "Bravolebrities" where you can find the favorite places that your favorite Bravo characters like to hang out at by using Foursquare in your own city.

- Q: Right, you know, the television industry and film industry, of course, are accustomed to this notion of the screen and the screen culture that comes with it, but for the book industry, the screen culture is something that they're coming to really fresh and I understand at the center, you are doing some research on future forms of ebooks, talking about how they will look and feel. Tell us more about that.
- A: That's right. Well, we've just launched a project here on the future of the book in partnership with a company here in Vancouver called BookRiff, which is an offshoot of a very venerable Canadian publisher, Douglas & McIntyre, and like a lot of publishing companies, Douglas & McIntyre has been thinking about the future of the book and they created BookRiff as a way for people to have kind of an iTunes like experience of the book.



So the same way that iTunes has taken off because people have the ability to curate their own playlist, BookRiff lets people create their own books and they're doing deals with publishers all over the world so that users of the BookRiff system will have access to the content that's relevant to them and be able to assemble their own books, which they can then consume either on the Kindle or on the iPad or actually print as a physical book, and we're working with them because our students, who include designers and digital artists and interactive artists and a lot of our faculty, are really interested as well in how these new platforms allow new forms of storytelling and allow the convergence of media that range not only from text to image but gaming and video and really thinking – and social media as well, and really thinking about how once you put the book – I mean it's one thing to have a book on a Kindle, right? Which is still ultimately a fairly booky experience. I would argue it's very different qualitatively from reading on paper, but the structure is still the same. It's very much linear and you're turning pages.

You move that to an iPad and I think it's very telling that a lot of the iPad book development is not happening within the Kindle store or the iBook store, it's happening in the form of individual applications that are being created, because if you're reading a book on the iPad, which is connected to the internet, which is able to support video, which is able to support full on applications, well, then what is it that makes a book a book? Is it that you're supposed to read it in linear order? Well, that's not totally it because we all have compilations of essays or jokes or cartoons that we read in nonlinear form. It's not necessarily they're having a single author because there are lots of anthologies out there. And it's no longer just about being text, because we've always had books that have images and now we also have these vooks, books that have videos in them.

So once you kind of get beyond the trope of a book as something that sits between two covers and gets read in order, I think it's very interesting to ask questions about, for example, the relationship between books and videogames, where you've got something that's a fixed, finite experience of maybe 20 hours, but you're not necessarily having the same experience every time you encounter that game and why should you necessarily have the same experience every time you encounter that text? So the project we're doing this semester, there's going to be a number of students who are creating prototypes of ebooks that really try and break out of that box of just telling a story in a linear form and experiment with the possibilities of creating books on platforms that can integrate all those different forms of media.

Q: That really sounds fascinating and I like the idea that you mentioned earlier about artists, just you never see them coming until they're there. Nobody could anticipate Picasso, he just arrived. And I think that the kinds of work you're doing in that



research will find, maybe if not another Picasso, at least somebody who tweaks the form, who introduces an element that nobody had thought of before and that's going to be unexpected, but it could have tremendous impact on an entire industry.

A: I mean that's certainly my hope and I mean frankly part of the reason I find it such an interesting field to go into is that when you're building a research center as we are, there's so many areas you could work on and there are a lot of challenges in the technology world which are kind of winner takes all. I mean you look at Facebook, it's a case in point. I mean there's only room in people's lives for so many social networks and the first mover advantage is enormous, whereas I think what's interesting about ebooks is it is a kind of let 1,000 flowers bloom and I hope that there will be research centers all over the world that are undertaking experiments with ebooks because we need to have an explosion of different approaches.

I mean imagine how impoverished our culture would be if every book consisted of the same physical structure, the same number of pages, the same narrative form. I mean that would be tedious and we all love authors who – I mean we don't all love authors, but you see that authors who break out of the conventional form, even just within the context of a written book, are celebrated. I mean I'm thinking about David Mitchell, who I'm going to be seeing this weekend at the Vancouver Writers Festival. He broke through as a writer partly because he was so innovative in his use of just the print book, and so I feel like when you get onto the iPad in particular and these other tablets, there really needs to be as much experimentation as possible and it's not going to be I hope ever done because this is a medium that gives us chances to rethink the way we tell stories as a culture.

Q: That's fascinating, Alexandra. It's great to chat with you about it. We're talking to Alexandra Samuel, Director of the Social and Interactive Media Center at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, and the point you were making about encouraging experimentation, it reminds me of a program we did a few months ago, looking at the very beginning of the book publishing industry. In fact, before it was an industry, when they were simply book publishing, with the Gutenberg Revolution, they invented a printing press, but they didn't necessarily invent a publishing business, and I think it took some time before they had that business. We're in about the same moment, I think. We've invented a new kind of printing press, this online publishing, but we're still working out the business piece and I know that that concerns you as well. You're a former freelance journalist. You still blog today for Oprah and the Harvard Business Review and so forth and you're asking some, I think, really pertinent questions about how creators earn a living today.



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A: Yeah. Yeah, I mean it's something I really struggle with. So many of my friends are artists and writers and I think anyone who is in a creative industry today is asking that question, of how do I earn a living as a content creator? What I find really fascinating is that so many of the people I talk to, and I hear this frankly especially in the newspaper business where people say, you know, we have to have a business model because investigative journalism is so important, it can't go away. Well, I totally buy that investigative journalism is so important that it shouldn't go away, but if you look at human history, good things go away all the time. I mean just because we think that there are certain kinds of writing, certain kinds of content that would never be created in an economy where there's no copyright, doesn't mean that copyright is going to survive, and I hope very much that we will find some sustainable business models that allow high quality, in depth content creation to survive and where it isn't just going to be on the basis of mass market appeal, so that you can have unpopular forms of writing nonetheless make a living.

I'm not convinced it's going to happen. I don't see it in the cards at this moment and I think that we have to consider that we may be facing a future in which certain forms of content that we value now, perhaps like investigative journalism, become very scarce, but other forms of content that right now we don't enjoy become abundant, and in particular, I think right now as a culture, we tend to think about content very much from a consumption point of view and we focus on all the kinds of content we want to be able to consume, but at a human level, I'm not sure that the experience of creating content isn't more profound than the experience of consuming content, and anyone who is a writer will tell you that they pretty much have to write for their sanity and I think there are also a lot of us who feel like we have to read for our sanity, but it's different. And what social media has done, I mean this medium that's making it so hard to earn a living as a writer, is to make it much more accessible for people to have the experience of being a writer and I think that's very powerful.

Q: Really thoughtful answer and I appreciate chatting with you, Alexandra, about these points, and look forward to doing so again sometime. We've been chatting with Alexandra Samuel, Director of the Social and Interactive Media Center at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, about her work and her research in social media and its impact not only on publishing, but on society at large. Alexandra, thank you for joining Beyond the Book today.

A: Thank you so much. Great talking with you.

Q: We enjoyed it and for all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, thank you very much for listening to Beyond the Book.



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