

Information, hyper-reality and the meaning gap:

A study into loss of meaning through an analysis of the Internet poetry community.

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ABSTRACT

Technological innovation and the increase of computer-based information systems into all aspects of Western culture has facilitated an explosion of data begging for our attention. However, human capacity to convert these symbols into information and subsequently, appropriate meaning, remains static. Through an ethnographic study of the internet poetry community, this paper analyses whether we, as a culture, are losing meaning. The findings of this research show that while meaning loss does occur in data laden areas, individuals' fragment into smaller communities in order to successfully combat noise-levels and in turn, appropriate meaning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their support during the completion of this thesis paper. My dissertation advisor, Steve Smithson for his always open door and patience with my constantly changing topic. Susan Scott, and our intellectual muse *William*, for sharing her big brain, her library and her time. You inspire me. Lucas Introna whose virtual communication gave me the gift of Baudrillard and the joyful realisation that philosophy can thrive in IS research. Gus and Tony for challenging my belief structure until it crumbled and then helping me rebuild it far stronger. To Cath for being my alter-ego at all the right times. To Marco for bringing passion back to my life. For supporting me both intellectually and emotionally and for relishing in the insane. Te voglio bene.

A special 'on bended knee' thank you to the poets. You do what others only talk about.

This research study is dedicated to my family who have let me run free without a leash. Who have always believed that I would combine the left and right sides of my mind. Addendum number one: To my father who shares philosophy with me trans-Atlantically and teaches wisdom with his words.

And it was at that age -- poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't
know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street that I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires
or returning alone,
there I was without a face
and it touched me.

-Pablo Neruda
from "Poetry"

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1 Introduction

"Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

T.S. Eliot: Choruses from *The Rock*

T.S. Eliot reminds us that Life exists not because of the accumulation of information. In fact, the essence of life can be found within wisdom and wisdom comes to us not when we chase the tail of advancement, but when we sit with that which matters to us and appropriate meaning from the information provided. Eliot's words can be seen as an elegy for life lost through the abundance of information we confront each day.

Today in Western culture, the boundaries that once existed due to geographical restrictions are lowering and we are able to communicate over a global telecommunications network called the internet. Computer based information systems' provide us with efficient tools for obtaining information and have become so technologically powerful, they are restrained only by human capacity.

Eliot mourns for a time when human capacity was all that restrained *wisdom*, where one could resonate for hours with a poem. Today, languishing in nostalgia will not return us to times when life was slower and allowed for extended contemplation. Many theorists believe the political, economic, and cultural landscapes of Western culture are existing within an 'information society' -- a society whose means of production comes not from the manufacturing of goods but from transactions of knowledge. While others question the degree to which life is affected, and an era defined, by the increase of data. In the field of information systems research, it is tempting to try and understand society

through the traditional lens of computer science. However, as technology pervades the social and cultural aspects of our society, we must look for alternative paradigms through which we can frame cultural issues. The social theorist, Boland (1987), in his discussion of information, identifies a face of fantasy which he believes is the source from which creative solutions come.

"One face of fantasy gives us an image that is an inventive, creative leap. It brings coherence to disparate events, makes the world sensible, and provides theories to guide enquiry...Koestler (1964) called this juxtaposition of incongruous elements to gain new insights into a problem the essence of creativity."

We live in a world where the symbols of art, philosophy, mathematics and political theory commingle as they travel through cables, where poets are programming experts and media experts philosophise. Today, let us look to the artists for lessons in carving wisdom through technology. Therefore, this research study invokes the face of fantasy by juxtaposing information systems theory and postmodern philosophy with the art of poetry and looks for creative insight into the perplexing issue of loss of meaning. Through an ethnographic study of today's internet poetry community I ask the question, are we as a culture, losing meaning, and if we are, what are its effects?

The invocation presented in this paper begins with a discussion of terms fundamental to understanding the issue of loss of meaning. Having defined these issues, chapter three provides a theoretical framework on which my empirical work is based. Chapter four presents the study's research methodology and highlights information gathered from my empirical research. Finally, chapter five presents an analysis of my findings regarding the issue of loss of meaning.

2 Definitions

2.1 *Data, Information and meaning*

In order to research the loss of meaning in Western culture we must first differentiate between that which is data and that which is information. However this is not an easy task, not only are these conceptual terms but definitions can be applied relative to the way a person views the world. Within the field of information systems research there exists several schools of thought, which attempt to delineate the process of information formation.

The theorists who fall within the Functionalist classification of the Burrell and Morgan (1979) framework of sociological paradigms, view data as symbols when involved in a communication process, data are logically ordered by the recipient thereby transforming them into information. Stonier exemplifies this notion:

"Information exists. It does not need to be perceived to exist. It does not need to be understood to exist. It requires no intelligence to interpret it. It does not have to have meaning to exist. It exists."
[In Webster, 27]

Considerable work has been written by Interpretivist theorists such as Boland, who discuss the nature of information and meaning in our current era. These theorists begin defining information by delineating its differences to data. This distinction is in itself a partial definition of information. Information systems researchers Jonathan Liebenau & James Backhouse (1990) develop an understanding of information by interpreting a variety of pre-existing definitions. Their concluding definition is that,

"[I]nformation cannot exist independently of the receiving person who gives it meaning and somehow acts upon it...information is data arranged in a meaningful way for some perceived purpose." [3]

Boland takes this definition a step further by stating that community is a necessary component in obtaining information and meaning:

"...perfect information does not exist as an object, and intelligence does not exist, except as it is embodied in a human being. Information is not a resource to be stockpiled as one more factor of production. It is meaning and can only be achieved through dialogue in a human community. Information is not a commodity. It is a skilled human accomplishment." [Boland, 377]

Meaning is appropriated when we draw from our stock of knowledge and apply understanding to information. Boland suggests that this stock of knowledge is formed through community. I believe this refers to both direct community interaction and an individual's observational interaction with their community. For it is through community that a person learns the context of the information they receive. Latour (1987) furthers the notion that community is fundamental to meaning construction:

"Fact construction is so much a collective process that an isolated person builds only dreams, claims and feelings, not facts". [41]

Although he is referring to science, Latour makes an important point about the importance of community in appropriating meaning. Community is not just an environment in which meaning is shared between its members but also a conduit through which it is formed.

Data, information and meaning are concepts that are difficult to unequivocally define. My attempt is to provide a framework for this research study and aid the reader in understanding my analytical thought process. The definitions provided by the Interpretivist thinkers provide an appropriate landscape for research into

the issue of loss of meaning. These definitions go furthest in applying abstract concepts to concrete human activity and will therefore be the basis of thought when discussing the theoretical framework of this study.

2.2 Poetry

In order to understand how meaning is effected by the influx of data and information in Western culture, I have conducted empirical research into the art of poetry found on the internet by immersing myself in the internet poetry community.¹ This community was chosen primarily because I believe poets actively seek meaning from the daily occurrences of life and could therefore speak to whether a loss was occurring. While what is defined as meaningful differs between individuals, all the poets with whom I have interacted spend their lives trying to get *further* and *deeper* into the essence of experiences.

The Mirriam-Webster dictionary (1997) defines poetry as "writing that formulates a concentrated, imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm." This definition implies that the creation and reading of poetry thrives on underlying meaning, on the implication of the unsaid.

Poetry is important to culture because it communicates the intricacies of life in a style that allows individual interpretation. Poetry developed out of an oral tradition, where stories of culture and community were shared between groups of people. However, in both its oral and written forms, poetry's succinct and independent structure works to provide a thread that binds individuals to their communities.

¹ A further discussion of internet poetry services and the internet poetry community is provided in chapter four of this paper.

The advent of information and communication technologies such as the internet, has created a medium through which the physical appearance of poetry is re-defined. The world wide web has challenged the traditional structures of poetry because of its multi-media based, non-linear environment.

Poets have been seen throughout history as the brooding souls upon which heavy burdens fall. While this is a romanticised version of all artists, it is the poets who are meant to tell us something of our world. If you close your eyes and imagine 'poet' you may see Keats, the Beat generation, your younger sister, yourself. Do you see a person who is isolated by their thoughts, a loner, a bit different? Are they intuitive, unkempt, reclusive? Perhaps they are none of these things. Most likely they are on the internet, or on their way there. Poets have found an opportunity for community, which previously didn't exist. No longer do poets need to wait for organised community readings or sign up for workshop classes with several other poets from the same geographical location. Technology has mobilised an artistic group and this group has found a way to feed their creativity and to appropriate meaning through community.

This section provides a backdrop for the research study. Having defined these issues, chapter three provides a theoretical framework for my empirical research and draws from literature within the fields of information systems theory and postmodern philosophy. My purpose is to frame the era in which Western culture finds itself and upon doing so, to highlight the issues relevant for determining when loss of meaning has occurred.

3 Theoretical Framework

Prior to presenting empirical data, it is necessary to frame the research question by better defining the era in which Western culture finds itself and by highlighting factors that determine how meaning is, or is not, appropriated by individuals of that culture. Therefore, this chapter begins by revisiting the notion of data and information, this time asking whether the influx of either mark the beginning of an epoch. Next, an exploration of postmodern philosophy provides the cultural lens through which I will critically evaluate my empirical data. The final section of this chapter frames the notion of loss of meaning within today's Western culture and presents the notion of a 'meaning gap'.

3.1 The Information Society

*"For any genuine appreciation of what an 'information society' is like, and how different - or similar - it is to other social systems we must surely examine the meaning and quality of the information."
[Webster, 29]*

Undeniably, technology has become a vital component of the world in which we live. This in turn has effected change within our social structure by increasing the amount of available data, the speed at which information is disseminated and the degree to which we appropriate meaning from this influx. Similar to the debate which surrounds the ambiguous concepts of data, information and meaning, is that of defining the era in which Western culture finds itself during the late twentieth century. Many of the Functionalist theorists who see information as data, believe we are currently immersed within the 'information society' where information is the driving force of both our economy and in turn, our culture. While others question the validity of these forecasts and choose to refer to the information society as a utopian model for understanding the role information has in our culture. [Webster]

Daniel Bell (1974) is the forefather of traditional information society theory. He was the first to discuss a move toward the 'postindustrial society', an epoch he defined as one where the primary economy of a society shifts away from a manufacturing focus and toward service industries. Where information is the key resource. Bell focused his discussion around issues of the knowledge worker, claiming that in the 'post-industrial society', professional services would dominate along with 'white collar' professions. In turn this would create an increase in the amount of information generated.

Bell paved the way for an entire theoretical movement centred around the implication of technology on society. Bell and his fellow theorists mark the beginning of the 'information society' by mathematically quantifying the increase in information as it compared to the Industrial era.

However, much criticism of Functionalist 'information society' theory exists and a large theoretical shift has occurred within the field of information systems research. Many theorists now develop narratives about the information age by first understanding the nature of our culture. One of the main contentions with Functionalist theory is presented by Frank Webster (1995) in his book *Theories of the Information Society*. Webster critically analyses the use of quantitative methods for determining the era in which society finds itself. He challenges the notion that increased information is directly proportionate to our immersion within a new era. Further, he takes issue with the deterministic nature of many information society theorists, by questioning how facts and figures impact social change.

"A result of a diet of statistic upon statistic about the uptake of computers, the data-processing capacities of new technologies, and the creation of digitalised [sic.] networks is that people readily come to believe that information is the essential sustenance of the social system." [27]

The debate of the 'information society' constitutes an entire research study. This overview is not an attempt to confirm whether we are within a new era. Rather, it is to highlight that firstly, little is gained by studying culture through statistical analysis and secondly, nothing is gained when those statistics are generated from the raw material of unprocessed information (data). Webster states, "culture is quintessentially about meanings, about how and why people live as they do"[28]. It would follow that we must look to meaning in order to understand the era in which our culture finds itself.

However, just as some information society theorists believe in the quantification of information as a basis for the emergence of a new era, postmodernist theory places great emphasis on a society in which there is an influx of non-referential symbols (data). Where individuals revel in the abundance of images rather than attempting to appropriate meaning. While fundamentally divergent in terms of theoretical makeup, both groups predict a future where data (symbols) are abundant and a quest for meaning is irrelevant.

3.2 *The cultural lens of postmodernism²*

"...[P]ostmodernism celebrates the inauthentic, the superficial, the ephemeral, the trivial and the flagrantly artificial." [Webster, 170]

Postmodernist theory will be employed as a cultural lens through which to view this study's empirical data. However as Webster stated, culture is about meaning and much postmodernist thought views any attempt to appropriate meaning as futile. I purport that this contradiction provides the most effective basis for examining the issue of loss of meaning in our culture, for to disprove the futility of appropriating meaning may in turn prove its existence.

² For purposes of this research study, I have limited my discussion of postmodernism to Baudrillard's work which directly relates to technology and its affects on society. However, a canon of work exists around the subject of signification which the reader may find of interest including such philosophers as Derrida and Foucault.

Many theorists attempt an explanation of postmodern thought, the difficulty being that it describes a philosophy based on the lack of definitive philosophy. Postmodernist theory was born from a rejection of modernity and the Age of Enlightenment, a period of time that both marked the end of the agricultural societies in Europe and signified a series of cultural and scientific changes. During the Enlightenment, modernist thinkers strove to obtain underlying truth and meaning. Philosophical theory and artistic expression were conduits through which truth would be found. Contrary to this notion, postmodernist thought rejects the search for hidden meaning, believing that during the Age of Enlightenment, 'truths' were defined as such merely because of the authoritarian power held by the philosophers and artists of the time. [Webster]

For purposes of this research study the discussion of postmodernist theory will be held on a purely cultural level. For it is here that the distinction is widely felt and, it is often argued, is the only place in which an obvious distinction can be made between modernism and postmodernism. For example, within the literary arts, Western readers experience postmodernism through the weakening of our literary canon.³ While still an important measure of literary work within our culture, canonical work has been under attack by postmodernist thinkers as elitist and non-representational of the diversity found within Western culture. The movement toward the disbanding of our traditional literary cannon is an attempt to free readers from one, authoritarian version of truth.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1983), furthers postmodernist thought in his discussion of reality and representation relationships. Baudrillard philosophises that the growth of media coupled with a societal focus on urbanisation and increased mobility, creates a culture where we are unable to

³ The canon to which I refer is well documented within the discipline of humanities.

determine what is authentic, true and meaningful. [Webster] This is due to the influx of signs (symbols/data) which pervade every moment of our lives. According to Baudrillard, signs are not representational of reality rather, they are 'simulations' and cannot convey truth or meaning. Simulations are portrayals of other signs and therefore, the only truths to be found in them are ultimately untrue because they are found in the falsity of simulation. This is what Baudrillard defines as hyper-reality. As signs increase due to growth in our communication mediums, we are unable to decode them. Therefore, they become mere images. Baudrillard believes that in today's media dominated world, these images overpower real communication and hence all meaning is lost. [In Gane]

"The medium gets the upper hand, basically, when images - or discourses - begin to proliferate, apart from the meaning which they bear....There is a kind of autonomy now of the systems of images and systems of discourse which has got the upper hand over meaning." [In Gane, 145]

When this autonomy occurs Baudrillard suggests that we communicate in order to fuel the media's appetite for providing continuous, one-dimensional images.

"...Make the media function at all costs. It's of little consequence whether the contents are completely real or unreal, or hyper-real; the important thing is that the medium continues to roll" [In Gane 146]

Media does not allow for an interruption in the flow of images in order to appropriate meaning. Therefore, as images proliferate and technology provides a continual, global communication flow, postmodern society's only retaliation is to change what is sought by relinquishing the futile quest for meaning within a sea of images. For to search for that which by the very nature of postmodernity cannot exist, is to search for truth in simulations. [in Gane]

Similar to Baudrillard's postmodernist philosophy of simulation, Webster agrees that we are experiencing an influx of signs as we move toward the information age. However, his concordance with postmodernism stops there. He states that while the interpretation of information make take longer and require a more concentrated effort, little evidence is available to demonstrate that a direct correlation exists between increased information and loss of meaning. [Webster]

3.3 *The meaning gap*

"In this crisis of meaning, the contemporary rush to personal computers seems a last desperate attempt to master the tidal wave of incoming information....There seems little reason to be confident that further increases in public information will restore a meaning that seems to be slipping away." [Klapp, 8]

In his essays *Overload and Boredom*, Orrin E. Klapp (1986) reasons that the degeneration of meaning occurs through increasing load of data and information. His research discusses two types of meaning loss, one that occurs through the redundancy of information, the second from an overwhelming variety of information in which 'noise' is created. For purposes of this research study I will focus on his work related to variety and noise in an attempt to judge the level of meaning loss within the internet poetry community.

What is relevant for this research study about Klapp's writings on noise and variety is the similarity it has to Baudrillard's opinion that the media is inundating us with signs all of which end up as images carrying no meaning. The fear that Klapp expresses is that society is less able to gain meaning from data because of noise levels.

"Sheer noise (random, senseless variety) is boring because it has no message. But more important for the modern information society is the huge amount of communication that carries clear messages yet is acting like noise." [84]

Klapp outlines nine ways in which information becomes noise, some of which are pertinent to this research. Loudness is the first and most obvious form of information acting as noise, through ostentatious displays. A piece of information becomes intrusive and prevents alternate data from being decoded by the recipient. Channel clutter converts information into noise when communication within a medium consists of a high level of simultaneous transmissions. Such a situation encourages the degradation of information and results in cursory rather than concentrated thought. Lack of feedback creates noise because of the inverse relationship between communication volume and relevant response. Finally, Klapp cites overload as a factor causing information to be converted into noise. Individuals are able to extract less information because of the sheer volume of data that they encounter.

While the volume of data increases with each day, our intellectual capacity to convert data into information, and appropriate meaning remains static. It is illogical to assume therefore, that we will extract the same amount of meaning from information as in previous times. According to Klapp, this phenomenon creates a lag between information generated and meaning formed which he terms the 'meaning gap'.

In describing the occurrence of a meaning gap, Klapp makes a distinction between levels of information and their relative conversion into meaning. He employs a metaphor of horses involved in a race to illustrate the point.

*"In a race between...sorts of information, we expect information processing, for the sake of practical decision and working consensus, to be a fast horse, whereas meaning is a slow horse—and the highest meaning, wisdom, is last of all to arrive, if ever."
[111]*

This quotation reminds us of T.S. Eliot's elegy for Life and wisdom lost through the unending quest for information. Does a meaning gap exist within Western culture? How do we appropriate meaning and search for wisdom amidst the noise of our media? Is it futile as Baudrillard believes? In order to gain insight into these questions and analyse the validity of Baudrillard's postmodern prognosis, empirical research was conducted of the internet poetry community.

4 Research Methodology

In an attempt to understand whether loss of meaning is occurring within the internet poetry community, an idiographic research method was employed. Ethnographic observation was deemed to be the most appropriate research tool because of its ability to provide a rich, qualitative picture of a complex social environment. While I believe a great deal could be learned from conducting nomothetic research on meaning loss, my intention was to follow Webster's belief that understanding culture requires understanding meaning. Therefore, I immersed myself within the internet poetry community.

During my observation, I conducted twenty-five email interviews and recorded notes during relevant conversations. A series of standard questions about the nature of the internet poetry community and the content of material found within the offered services, were asked of each interviewee. In many instances, these discussions were furthered by interviewees elaborating on their previous comments. In order to understand whether the literary art of poetry differs on the internet, many of the questions posed to the interviewees required a comparison between the on-line environment and the poetry experiences they had prior to joining the internet. These interviews helped me build a descriptive narrative detailing the way in which meaning exists in this community. (section 4.4)

The following chapter begins by noting the limitations of my chosen methodology in order to present a realistic and fair picture of my empirical data. Subsequently, in order to frame the research study and provide a context for the reader, section two and three define the 'internet poetry community' by highlighting the main poetry internet services used by the community and then by defining the community and its members. Finally, section four of this chapter

clusters the case work around the themes of access, fragmentation and community, which will be analysed in chapter five.

4.1 *Methodological limitations and advantages*

My research focus was to understand a community extremely diverse both demographically and psychographically and therefore, ethnography proved insightful. However, having been a member of the community for three years, it was difficult at times to maintain an objective perspective. I have a vested interest in the success of this community but have made a conscious effort throughout my research to be unbiased in my approach. Additionally, I believe my familiarity with the community made it difficult for me to identify issues, which to a newcomer may have been glaringly obvious.

Counter to these limitations of my methodology, incredibly rich material was received from the community which I attribute to my being viewed by the community as an artist with a vested interest in the future of poetry. The people with whom I interacted during my research often provided highly coherent and critical understandings of their environment. I believe their willingness to discuss the negative aspects of the community occurred both because of the rapport we have and their dedication to improving their community.

4.2 *Poetry internet services*

As described earlier, the internet provides a global communications facility by linking together networked computers. This networked communication allows for interactive and communicative services to exist regardless of physical location. This section attempt to provide insight into the 'The internet poetry community' by highlighting the main poetry internet services used by the community.

The first poetry to be found on the internet arrived soon after the development of the Usenet newsgroups in 1979. These groups marked the beginning of on-line

discussions by topic area within a mailing list format. The primary difference being that rather than receiving and posting articles to personal mailboxes, the postings are viewed by subscribers to the group who visit the Usenet site. Today, the definitive poetry newsgroup is that of rec.arts.poems (RAP), and often provides one's initiation into the world of on-line poetry.

Many poets who began using the internet in the early eighties, made their first contacts through their internet service provider such as Prodigy and America On-line which offer poetry bulletin board systems (BBS) as part of their member services. The BBS mimic the Usenet format but cater to a smaller network of users.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC), provides the only truly interactive medium for the internet poetry community. On IRC, real time conversations takes place within designated poetry channels.

Private Email groups, also called listservs, are one of the most popular and long standing components of this community and act as smaller, more selective versions of RAP where people post, read and provide feedback on poetry to one another.

On-line forums are similar to Usenet newsgroups or Bulletin Board Systems but are found within the world wide web environment. The user friendly interface of the Web has seen a surge in On-line forums in which a moderator leads the discussion of a certain topic while interested parties post responses directly to the Web site.

The creation of poetry Web sites is perhaps the most popular aspect of the internet poetry community at the moment. Sites vary in both content and structure with many containing both poetry and reference material about

pertinent poetry resources on the internet. These pages range from simplistic home pages which are insular, having only a few links between sheets, to complex collections of sites connected through hyper links.

Having described the poetry internet services in which members participate, further contextualisation occurs in section three by providing a mosaic of the members of this community.

4.3 The internet poetry community

The Mirriam-Webster dictionary defines community as "*an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location*". The common location for this poetry community is the internet, although it cannot be defined geographically, it represents a common location. For purposes of this research study, I have classified regular users⁴ of the poetry internet services as belonging to the internet poetry community.

The community consists of a diverse group of people, the majority of whom consider themselves a poet and a reader of poetry. Additionally, the community includes poetry readers who do not write poetry but who participate actively by offering feedback on the work that they read. Finally, a third type of community member is that of the 'zine Editor⁵ who often is both writer, reader and publisher of poetry.

Not only is the community demographically and psychographically disparate, the level of involvement within the community varies as well. Below I have extracted portions from two interviews in order to highlight the diversity.

⁴ Regular is defined here as a minimum usage of one poetry internet service per week.

⁵ A 'zine being defined as a small press poetry magazine published either electronically, in print, or both.

"I currently am a member of 4 poetry mail listservs and am in the process of putting together my first electronic webzine, 'Traced In Light'. I am also slowly but surely compiling a list of links to other zines and poetry sites. And for the heck of it, I wrote a Javascript applet to simulate a 'fridge magnet poetry kit'". [D. Powers]

The above poet spends a good deal of time involving herself with creative internet poetry projects while the below community member is interested in providing an organised method resolving queries.

"I began reading Usenet in 1991 while in graduate school studying botany. Poetry was otherwise thin on the ground. I work....on the RAP FAQ which is informational, a how-to-look-things-up. I have collected hundreds of web links to poetry through requests to identify poems on RAP and hope to cross-index them on my own web page." [M. Lee]

The above examples illustrate that within the internet poetry community different people provide a variety of contributions toward the poetry internet services. Due to the eclectic nature of people and services which constitute the internet poetry community, a plethora of member categories could be defined. However, my purpose is not to classify the community. Rather, the above descriptions should be seen as background material to aid in understanding the empirical data.

4.4 Presentation of empirical data

This section is clustered around the themes of access, fragmentation and community in order to highlight the views of the internet poetry community. The presentation of empirical data helps to answer the research question, are we as a culture, losing meaning, and if we are, what are its effects?

When discussing issues of access many of the community members I interviewed saw the internet as an inclusive environment allowing individuals to transcend physical boundaries and in turn, interact with poets from diverse

backgrounds. Simultaneously however, the same members found the internet restrictive because of the skewed demographic make-up of those with net access.

"The biggest [concern] in my mind is that no matter how accessible the electronic media seems to us, there are still huge segments of the population under-represented" [D. Powers]

There existed an acute awareness that only a small percentage of Western poets and readers have access to the internet. However, the existing on-line population is far greater than any geographically based community of which members had been a part and the level of poetry is a reflection of this phenomenon. Community members exhibited a concern for the current levels of noise and the plethora of poor quality poetry on-line. Many believed that this was proportionate to the number of poets found within a given space and that this ratio would remain static as access increased. While others felt that the net bred mediocrity and encouraged anyone with internet access to call themselves poet.

"The editing is poor, the standards low - heavy irony, sentiment, cheap shots with emotional appeal are too popular. The notion that this is somehow a great breakthrough, that the 'net is re-defining 'good' poetry, is ludicrous." [B. Wands]

Several interviewees expressed explicitly, while others, through their movement to smaller workshop groups, implied that feedback had become either non-existent or minimally constructive in the Usenet newsgroup, RAP. This was due to the vast amount of postings many of which are only peripherally related to poetry. While most community members I interviewed were initiated into the internet poetry community via RAP, all have reduced the time they spend there and have formed splinter groups in order to reduce noise and in turn provide higher quality poetry, discussion and feedback.

"When I first got Usenet access,....I wandered into rec.arts.poems and spent some time there. [I] Enjoyed it but found it overwhelming - and with high noise levels. [I] decided that I preferred the higher signal ratios of smaller groups." [A.C. Missias]

Many of the members still remained somewhat involved in the RAP newsgroup but the nature of their activities were to, as one poet stated, "post-and-run". [K. Wolman]

Access to the internet has encouraged a growth in electronic publishing. Community members expressed conflicting views about the growing number of electronic poetry 'zines. All members of the community with whom I spoke were encouraged by the publishing movement, claiming that it eradicated the staunch poetic canon which is supported by traditional print publishers. One poet stated,

"The lack of censorship in cyberspace is a godsend for all artists and serious readers. Imagine what the Beats could have done with this medium!!!!!! One need not rely on the mercy of an editor to get one's works in print; one need only post it." [A. Frank]

While another member of the community expressed the importance of reading within an uncensored environment.

"I've found great works by otherwise unknowns who have published their own poems online. It is nice to have access to an audience without going through the preferences of a traditional editor." [J. Bernichon]

Prior to the internet community, poets published one another's work within what is called the 'small press'. Small press editors, the large majority of whom are poets, are usually motivated to publish a magazine because of their dedication to the art. The small press arena still thrives today and combats, as always, production costs such as printing and postage. The majority of printed magazine editors with whom I spoke lost money on the publication of each issue. Today

publishing of poetry on the world wide web is one of the most popular activities in which poets' engage. There exists a plethora of electronic small press 'zines some of which are reproductions of a printed issue while others exist as purely digital texts. The costs of producing an electronic 'zine are minimal as www home pages are usually included in the cost of subscription to the internet. Submissions are received through email and are often times pre-formated. There are no printing or distribution charges and the readership is potentially greater.

Many community members were sceptical of electronic publishing and expressed concerns that such 'zines would be managed by those with more programming experience than editorial skill. This in turn would lead to the web becoming a huge vanity press fuelled by writers' whose concerns lay more with being published than with the craft of poetry itself.

"These days, everybody who can type fancies himself a poet. Poetry on the web will continue to expand. Millions will be writing it, no one reading it...No one looks at poetry on the web, except poets who are seeking out places to submit." [V. Hervey]

Simultaneously however, many interviewees expressed the importance of the internet being uncensored and information being available if one is willing to search it out. This quandary sparked many debates as members tried to weigh their very really frustrations toward the amount of information on the internet against a philosophical belief in universal access to all information. During one of my most provocative interviews, a poet epitomised this struggle.

"Freedom from constrictions brings with it a concurrent abdication of craft. Basically, the net is drowning in millions of bytes of self-indulgent crap, peppered infrequently with brilliant work. As with any other category of information available on the net, the small amount of genuinely useful, relevant, appropriate information is almost completely eclipsed by BOATLOADS of the trivial, irrelevant and inane. The onus, as always, falls on the reader to apply his own standards and cull out those few available gems before being numbed and overwhelmed by the sheer unprecedented volume of undifferentiated 'stuff'." [C. Andregg]

The anarchic nature of the Web, poor interface design and even poorer content creates an environment where the reader finds it difficult to concentrate and is often distracted by the loudness of flashing lights and beckoning links.

"I find the eye candy has reduced most online poetry to a video game ambience." [M. Lee]

When asked to compare reading on line to the printed page, the majority of the respondents stated that they are better able to resonate to a printed codex of work. The print medium provides for the members, a tangibility and implied value that reading digitally did not.

While the abundance of noise causes frustration in many members, the strength of the poetry community speaks to the strength of the internet as a communication medium in which culture thrives. The majority of interviewees came to poetry long before the internet, and many honed their craft with books, paper and pen. For each of them, the literary art of poetry is defined independent of the medium in which it is practiced. However, when asked to describe the internet as it relates to poetry, each member was adamant about the internet being *more* than just a medium. Rather, it is viewed as a cultural environment where life is mimicked.

Those I interviewed and observed were far more positive when talking about the co-operative nature of the poetry community than when discussing issues of the internet as a medium for reading. The internet has become for many of them, a large poetry workshop where they mingle in the anarchic foyer of RAP until finding a niche group with whom they relate. Smaller email/listserv groups develop between those whose art/personalities resonate to one another. Poets usually submit to electronic 'zines and explore services based on word of mouth from the people within their network. While human networking is part of our everyday lives, it seems almost fundamental for survival within the internet.

When answering questions about both noise levels and community, each interviewee defined the internet poetry community as a sub-division of the larger available services. No two members defined the internet poetry community in the same way. However, each acknowledged that in an effort to reduce noise and increase meaningful communication, they became fragmented from the larger community and created a sub-network linking people and services. Within the world wide web, these sub-networks are created by linking meaningful sites together and thereby creating a smaller web of quality material. Many of the poets and readers with whom I spoke believed fragmentation to be extremely important for the future of quality poetry on the internet. Siting a fear that exponential growth of web pages would make meaningful information increasingly difficult to locate.

When asked to discuss the benefits of the internet poetry community, interviewees cited the increased exposure to an audience due to the convergence of poets within one location. Additionally, the interactive process of feedback encouraged poets to continue honing their craft. The knowledge that their writing had an audience validated their efforts and provided a sense of communal belonging.

"I found some old poems....and put them on rec.arts.poems, got appreciative comments, and kept writing because for the first time I had an audience with some degree of immediate feedback....Without electronic venues, I probably never would have taken up writing again."

In addition to the benefits of exposure and feedback that the internet provides as a communication medium, many poets thrive on the community which transcends many of the limitations found in daily life.

"There is a sense of camaraderie that allows experimentation and support that those of us who cannot take classes and/or workshops otherwise would not be able to participate in." [m.lee]

A unique and coveted benefit for poets and readers on the internet is their ability to communicate electronically with the author of a poem. During the interviews I found that poets' seized the opportunity to talk with authors of work which they respected. These interaction are efforts to provide critique to the author as well as an opportunity to discuss the author's intended meaning.

"...If you like the style, content, structure etc. [of a poem] you can tell that person...Often I find a story beneath the poet's work which blends with the poem and for me, makes it a more personal journey. An example is red slider's poems about a woman with Alzheimer's. I was struck by the beauty of these poems, and learning that they were written for his mother made them very special to me. I gain more each time I read them." [Janet Bernichon]

The interaction and feedback process begun on the internet is not limited to the electronic environment. Many community members have developed relationships which extend into their daily lives. Poets communicate over the telephone. Those who are in proximity to one another often gather together for local poetry readings and socialisation. There is also a significant effort made by poets with internet access to involve fellow artists who are without access.

This section has provided the reader with only a small fraction of the rich material I received during my ethnographic study of the internet poetry community. My purpose was to highlight key opinions surrounding the issues of access, fragmentation and community which are pertinent to this research study. In the following chapter this information will be analysed in an effort to understand the nature of meaning within this community.

5 Analysis of empirical data

This chapter presents an analysis of empirical data gathered from the internet poetry community by placing it within the theoretical context presented in chapter three of this study. The analysis will be structured around the issues of access, fragmentation and community in order to answer the research question are we as a culture, losing meaning, and if we are, what are its effects?

The theoretical framework presented in this report suggests a move toward a society in which an increasing amount of data inhibit individuals' ability to appropriate meaning from information. Baudrillard philosophises that images which refer only to themselves will force us into hyper-reality. While Klapp reasons that much of the information we receive becomes noise-like, thereby creating a gap between information generated and meaning formed. In order to analyse the implications of these theories we must first examine the degree to which the internet provides a continual flow of one dimensional images and whether those images cause a meaning gap to exist within the internet poetry community.

5.1 Access

The first indication that loss of meaning occurs within the internet poetry community was exhibited by the high noise levels experienced within the Usenet newsgroup, rec.arts.poems. The information degradation found within RAP created a notoriety for the service. The group is infamous within the internet poetry community for epitomising the anarchic nature of the internet in which chaos supercedes content and signs overwhelm meaning. However, it is important to view rec.arts.poems as a conservative representation of the potential for information degradation within the internet. The Usenet newsgroup is a structured service in which subscribers view the subject headings of each

post and can choose to follow a particular 'thread' or pass to the next. In this sense the reader is more likely to be successful in controlling noise levels and appropriating meaning.

Within the world wide web, the meaning gap may be lower than that of RAP on a page to page basis. However, the fundamentally anarchic nature of the web's infrastructure makes finding relevant threads potentially more difficult. Today when searching the web for poetry, an average 145,000 potential references are generated by the search engines⁶. This diffusion of poetry within the web creates a greater potential for noise than that of rec.arts.poems because it often requires the reader to search a plethora of data before finding any meaningful information. It is indicated that there will no longer exist one, definitive poetry forum. Rather, the web's anarchic design will encourage smaller, specialised forums which may be difficult to locate. It is realistic to surmise that this will exacerbate noise levels for many who 'surf' the web.

Similarly, the filter of a publishing industry has become far flatter with the move toward electronic publishing. The floodgates are open and each poem has a willing publisher on the web. However, the fear is that that the internet will become a huge vanity press in which everyone jumps on-line in order to present their material but spends little time within the environment, reading, discussing and developing cultural ties. This supports Baudrillard's theory that meaning is displaced by the constant flow of images across a screen. Each poet strives to have their work stand out from the continuous series of images and each expects that readers will appropriate meaning from their words. However, my research shows that very few poets' read as much on-line poetry as they post to the internet. The readers I interviewed noted that the time they spent with each piece on-line is far less than when they read off-line. The abundance of data

⁶ This figure was calculated by searching all available search engines with the term 'poetry' on August 28, 1997

waiting to be interpreted, the cost of being on-line and the de-valuing of individual work, encourages readers to move quickly from one poem to the next.

The Usenet newgroup service and the world wide web epitomise Baudrillard's postmodern media where images are generated autonomous to the existence of meaning. Poets' fuel the media by writing and posting poetry, with each new poem a wider gap is formed between what exists to be appropriated and our capacity to appropriate. However, this is where Baudrillard's philosophy falters, for he states that it is futile to fight for meaning in a sea of images. He philosophises that postmodern society must relinquish its quest for meaning and learn to revel in the experience of images. Rather, this research study indicates that the internet poetry community seeks to maintain meaning and facilitates this through their fragmentation into sub-networks.

5.2 *Fragmentation*

The fragmentation of the internet poetry community exhibits a desire by its members to reduce the meaning gap by forming smaller networks. These sub-networks allow individuals to forge a path through the maze of noise. This directly challenges Baudrillard's surrender to hyper-reality where truth and meaning are non-existent. While the members of the internet poetry community speak volumes about the importance of having unregulated, uncensored access to all information, they simultaneously work to insulate themselves from the noise. This seems somewhat similar to censorship, the difference being that community members have placed these restrictions on themselves. They feel able to venture into the larger internet community for information if they so choose. If Baudrillard's postmodern prophecy had credence, we would see the poetry community living within the larger internet environment, swimming in the sea of images

This study indicates that an increased volume of data available for consumption within the internet will continue to attract readers and writers of poetry through the doors of the world wide web and the RAP newsgroup. However, far less time will be spent appropriating meaning from the data generated within these warehouse like repositories. This is due to the impending vanity press mentality where poetry is posted, electronic 'zines are produced and home pages are created for an audience who is unable to appropriate meaning from a plethora of signs. The consequence of this phenomenon being the further fragmentation of individuals into sub-networks where the appropriation of meaning becomes easier due to a decrease in noise and an increase in community interaction.

5.3 Community

The fragmentation of the internet may be seen by some as antithetical to the nature of the internet as a global communications medium. It is important to remember however, that sub-networks are created in an effort to combat noise levels within the larger environments of the Usenet newsgroup, rec.arts.poems and the world wide web. This fragmentation does not *diminish* the internet's ability to transcend geographical boundaries. Rather, it *fosters* a sense of community and human interaction which both Latour and Boland stress as fundamentally important in the construction of meaning.

It is my interpretation that the success of poetry on the internet has more to do with the sense of community that poets experience, than with the quality of work which is available to be read. As was noted previously, the internet is becoming quite like a vanity press where poets' publish work because they seek exposure and feedback from their peers. It emerged from this analysis that the internet poetry community has created an environment which feeds and nurtures its members. Readers of poetry do not suffer in daily life from a scarcity of readable work. However, they do often suffer from a feeling of isolation within their craft. What members of the community seek is a dialogue with fellow

artists. Therefore, they create sub-networks consisting of peers with whom they have rapport. This sheds doubt on Baudrillard's theory that we communicate to fuel the black hole of our media and in turn we become slaves to its appetite for images. Rather it seems more reasonable that a plethora of poetry exists on the internet because poets have a need to expose their work and while this does fuel the internet, poets are not shackled to the medium. Rather, when they desire meaningful communication, they enter into smaller communities in which the exchange is less noisy.

The overwhelming theme which emerges from this study into the loss of meaning is that *community* rather than *access* to poetry is the *raison d'être* of the internet poetry community. It is through the gathering together of people that meaning appropriation becomes possible. Therefore, as long as communities exist within Western culture, its members will ensure that meaning is not lost.

This research study has enabled me to examine the issue of loss of meaning within the internet poetry community in an attempt to determine whether such a phenomenon is occurring. The poets and readers of this community will be the first to attest to a meaning gap within the internet. They provide examples, which directly support Baudrillard's theory that postmodernity is fuelled by the technology which presents us with continuous, meaningless images. However, rather than brood about the state of the world and throw out a flag of surrender, these poets transform their communities. They become far more adept at searching for and appropriating that which is fundamental to their artistic livelihood.

Baudrillard philosophised that postmodernity brings with it an influx of non-referential signs and the inevitable relinquishment of meaning. Webster disagreed with Baudrillard only to the extent that he claimed there was little evidence that this influx effected society's ability to appropriate meaning. While

not nomothetic research, this study illustrates that a loss of meaning does occur due to a variety of available information. Similarly, it disproves the futility of appropriating meaning and thereby encourages us to believe in its survival.

While the theoretical framework used in the study provided a solid backbone for the empirical work, the future of Western culture cannot be *named* through quantification, observation or philosophical reasoning. Our communities, in a quest for maintaining meaningful dialogue will define our era and will show us Life and wisdom through a face of fantasy.

6 Conclusion

The theoretical framework for my study was chosen in order to highlight the importance of defining the context of a situation prior to its analysis. As information systems become an ever more important factor in our daily lives, we must challenge ourselves as information systems professionals, not just to find creative solutions but to find those solutions through devising creative paradigms for analysis. Information society theorists attempt to *name* our era. We cannot understand our culture through a name. Baudrillard tries to save society by encouraging a sense of futility in the search for meaning. We gain nothing from predetermining our fate. While this research study is limited in scope and complexity, it attempts to gain *insight* into our society by juxtaposing a small segment of our culture with the theories we often take as gospel.

The empirical data gathered for this study were based on the environment of the internet poetry community. This community is one of artists who are driven by a need to communicate their work to others. More importantly however, this community is one of individuals who are fighting to retain meaning in our complex and overwhelming society. While society is not comprised solely of artists, or of people who actively notice the noise levels, which degrade information. It is a society in which meaning remains the way in which we understand the world. The members of the internet poetry community exemplify our ability to pro-actively shape how technology effects our lives.

A better understanding of how we are effected by the influx of data within our culture could be gained through further research into the loss of meaning. For example, is the poetry community unique in its fragmentation into sub-networks or is this a phenomenon, which is typical of high noise environments?

Additionally, this study raises questions about the appropriation of meaning by future generations. Many of the poets on-line today have grown up reading and writing within the linear, print medium and have been taught to value the hidden truths which lay beneath language. How will meaning be constructed by those who see through a purely postmodern lens and whose primary literary medium is the computer? Will this be when Baudrillard's forecast comes to bear?

One of the greatest rewards, and most difficult challenges, of this research study was the attempt I made to fuse together disparate areas of theoretical research. I found what Boland said to be true, that invoking a face of fantasy can bring creative insight to problems. I believe that the complex issue of loss of meaning in Western culture would benefit from a prolonged and concentrated study of information society theory and postmodern philosophy.

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