Achieving Digital Relevance

In today’s technological era, the physical and the digital coexist. Most individuals maintain some form of digital identity, whether it is through a social media platform or a personal blog. Even businesses and organizations oftentimes maintain a digital identity of some sort. Each individual wants people to value the digital content they put out into the digital environment. This increasingly large aggregate of digital identities results in each person or organization competing for digital relevance. When something in the physical world engages in and becomes part of the digital, it joins in the competition for others’ digital mindshare.

To ensure that people care about the content they put out, digital presences, the digital extensions of individuals or other physical embodiments, attempt to incite in their target individual an interest in the content that they publish. To consistently accomplish this though, the content these presences create within their respective digital environments must be valued as a necessity by the intended recipients of such content. Creators of digital content must instill in an individual the desire to seek out the content they publish. This desire must reach the point that if the individuals do not absorb the creator’s digital content, they will feel like they are missing out on something valuable.

If the creators of such digital content cannot accomplish this, their content will not be relevant in the eyes of their target individual. In effect, capturing the mindshare of others has become the task most important facing individuals in the digital realm.
The digital realm consists in large part of the Internet and the services it provides. To provide context, in *Digitized Lives* (2014), T.V. Reed uses the term “cyberspace” when explaining what this digital realm consists of. He goes on to describe how when imagining the cyberspace or the digital realm, many people envision “seldom more than an abstract image, often depicted as lines of light brilliantly traveling across the globe.” He explains that in reality though, the digital realm is rooted in the concrete. This “realm” could not be possible without “millions of earthbound terminals or hundreds of thousands of miles of cords or fiber optic cables.” Thus, out of a man-made construction has evolved a vague understanding of what the digital realm actually is and how it actually operates.

Neuroscientist and New York Times bestselling author Daniel J. Levitin explains in his recent book *The Organized Mind* (2014) that we, as humans, can pay attention to only a certain amount of outside information. This “outside information” envelops a variety of examples including but not limited to the content pushed from television, websites, social media platforms, and mobile devices. According to his 2011 research, Americans receive from external sources five times the amount of information as they did in 1986.

The effect of this, he argues, is that there are more stimuli competing for the brain’s resources. This increase of information relates in part to the rise of the digital medium. According to a January 2014 Pew Research Center survey (2014), the percentage of Internet users in the United States has increased from 14% in 1995 to 87% in 2014 (“Internet Use Over Time,” 2014). Levitin accounts that each “status you read on Facebook, every tweet or text message you get from a friend, is competing for resources
in your brain.” Under this design, the brain can be compared to an environment that only contains a scarce amount of resources. Only in this case, the scarce resources are the number of pieces of content that the brain can actively pay attention to. The digital entity that most successfully captures these resources will remain the most relevant to their target market.

Merriam-Webster defines a market as “a place where products are bought and sold.” When I use the term “target market” I am using it in a broad, inclusive context that encompasses any instance where an individual interacts with digital content not directly created by them. With this definition as a guide and upon closer examination of the digital realm, the existence of many such markets becomes apparent.

The most clearly defined of the digital markets are e-commerce websites. These sites bring together producers and consumers to facilitate the buying and selling of goods. Companies such as EBay and Amazon allow consumers to easily isolate the products they wish to buy regardless of the physical location of either the them or the seller. This allows transactions to take place that may have not otherwise occurred. This type of digital market is an example where consumers and producers exchange tangible products directly for monetary payment.

But what happens when an individual doesn’t have a clear idea of the product they want or if they desire something that is not a physical product? Just because direct, monetary payment is not involved does not make the market interaction any less significant. In fact, I contest that the majority of these “digital markets” lack the conditions of a traditionally defined market, one where buyers and sellers exchange products for an agreed upon currency.
Through the digital medium though, the concepts of buying and selling can extend to include the intangible as well. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994), Guy Debord writes, “the spectacle is another facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities.” This means that while money represents the accumulation of society’s goods and services. At the same time though, money itself can embody other forms. Here is where the relationship between consumer mindshare and published, digital content becomes most relevant.

The blogging industry is an example where such a relationship exists. Blogs rely heavily on creating valued content for their target individual. According to San Francisco based digital advertising firm Technorati (2010), there were over 8 million active blogs as of 2010. With such a high volume of blogs, in order to remain relevant within their respective distinctions, each blog must consistently publish content that their target audience will care about. Under this structure, the conditions of a market still exist. The blogger sells his or her articles to the reader in exchange for the reader’s attention.

From this interaction, the individual receives an intangible good: the satisfaction derived from reading the blog post. The blogger also benefits by way of indirect payment. As Ryan Holiday explained in his expose on the media, *Trust Me, I’m Lying* (2012), the payment structure of the blogging industry pays bloggers in direct relation to how many page views their articles receive. The more people that click on their article, the more they get paid. To get people to click on their articles consistently then, bloggers must instill in their target audience the desire to actively seek out the content on their blogs. Truly successful blogs will leave the target consumer feeling like they are missing out on something valuable if they do not check their latest blog posts throughout the day.
The blogging industry recognizes the importance of providing value to an individual’s web experience. This realization has led in part to their widespread success. Milad Doueihi describes blogging in his book *Digital Cultures* (2011) as “perhaps one of the greatest success stories of the emerging digital environment.” He goes on to explain that even traditional media platforms have had to incorporate blogs with their services to adapt to the proliferation of blogs.

Part of the reason why individuals respond the way they do to content can be explained by the brain’s neurological processes. In *The Organized Mind* (2014), Levitin explains how an individual’s mind has the ability to filter what it pays attention to. He talks about how the brain can monitor many different externalities simultaneously. The brain then determines what is of immediate importance and what can be disregarded. He discusses two principles that monitor individuals’ attention spans: change and importance. These two principles influence the way in which individuals present their content through digital media.

According to Levitin (2014), the first of these principles is change. “The brain’s change detector is at work all the time, whether you know it or not.” Hence, when something changes in an environment that has been held constant, the brain recognizes the change and alerts the individual. In the context of digital media, this brain function should be interpreted by creators of digital content as a cue to publish content that differentiates itself from the rest of the content in their respective digital environments. Thus, content that remains similar to the rest will fail to capture the attention of the individual, and not because the content does not contain value or is of poor design, but because brain processes will simply not pick up on it.
The second principle that affects the attention filter Levitin (2014) describes in *The Organized Mind* is the level of importance the brain places on something. He explains that the brain will signal to a person when to notice something if that something is of personal importance to that person. One of the examples he uses to illustrate this process is when someone in a crowded room hears their name spoken and immediately hones their attention in on the direction from which it was spoken. Even though there are many interactions going on around the individual in the crowded room, because the individual’s brain places high importance on the their name being spoken, the individual will immediately hone in on the source.

To demonstrate in practice the points he makes regarding the brain’s attention filter, Levitin introduces and provides analysis on a video known as the basketball demo. A *New York Times* review by Paul Bloom (2010) of psychologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons’ book, *The Invisible Gorilla*, explains that Chabris and Simons created the basketball demo video in 1999 to demonstrate the nature human awareness. This video provides proof to how the brain selectively filters what to pay attention to and what to disregard. The video, inserted below, provides better understanding to the points Levitin asserts.

[EMBEDDED OBJECT]

By paying close attention to the players in white passing the basketballs to one another, the brain disregards the actions of the players in black. Thus, when many people watch the video, they fail to see the man in the gorilla costume walk through the shot. The players in black are not important when watchers of the video solely focus on how many times the players in white pass the basketball.
Furthermore, in research conducted by the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, researchers studied cellular mechanisms for attention in the brain that provide further explanation to human attention. Their conclusion fell in line with Levitin’s as the researchers determined that “the ability to pay attention to relevant information while ignoring distractions is a core brain function.” Ultimately, these brain processes allow individuals to focus on what is truly important to them. Part of the report by the Geisel School of medicine cited that without a highly evolved attention filter, the quantity of external information would inundate individuals and, “we would not be able to effectively interact with our environment” (“Geisel School of Medicine,” 2013).

This same process occurs in digital media. Content that the brain deems unimportant will go unnoticed by the individual. Thus, creators of digital content must consider to what extent their target audience will value what they put out.

Effectively, the brain pays better attention to things that personally interest the individual. Thus, if a piece of digital content does not interest the individual, the person will most likely not notice it. From the perspective of the creators of digital content, this outcome would prove detrimental.

I argue that the recent influx in information as Levitin describes has contributed to the decline of RSS feeds in recent years. The purpose of an RSS feed is to aggregate web articles from the sites that an individual care about in a single, convenient location. Kara Reinsel, a digital integration and innovation expert at WPP, explains how the RSS feed reached its heyday in 2005 but usage has since largely fallen off (“Slow Demise of RSS,” 2013). The cause of this decline can be understood when looking at the combination of the increase of the content on the Internet and a web user’s decision-making process.
In a June executive summary (2014), reports that global Internet traffic has risen fivefold in the past five years and is expected to grow at an annual rate of 21% over the next five. Thus, with the substantial increase in the quantity of content on the Internet, a web user cannot precisely determine what content to follow.

This action of “following” online content can take several different forms. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter give account holders the option to select what content they want to have distributed to them in their newsfeeds. Following something online could also include regularly checking a blog to keep up with the latest posts or subscribing to a website’s weekly email list.

Deciding what content to follow online though has evolved into a substantial task. This is because when an increase in the number of choices occurs, regardless of what an individual ultimately decides, there exists a fear of missing out on a valuable piece of content. This fear exists because the individual cannot consume all of the content published to the Internet or published through a different digital medium. Because they cannot absorb all the information, individuals risk missing out on something that could have interested them. The increased number of choices complicates the process of determining what content is worth paying attention to.

Consequently, in the past few years, services that aggregate popular, trending content have risen greatly in popularity. The website Buzzfeed has become one of the most successful examples of these content aggregators. Created in 2001 by MIT grad student Jonah Peretti, Buzzfeed is an incubator for viral Internet content. A New York Magazine article (2013) by Andrew Rice describes Buzzfeed as “a hyperactive amalgam.” The site publishes hundreds of posts every day ranging from nonsensical lists
of Internet memes to longer and more serious opinion pieces. The article explains that Buzzfeed’s business model capitalizes on “native advertising.” In other words, they do not run any ads directly on their site. Rather, they earn revenue by publishing articles created by others and charging them for doing so. Companies and brands are willing to pay to place their articles on Buzzfeed because of the virility that Buzzfeed generates.

Ultimately, individual web users benefit from the Buzzfeed model because it allows them to locate popular, trending content from a single source. They can sidestep the task of going from website to website to determine the most interesting digital content of the day. In this instance, through their model, Buzzfeed has accomplished the task of turning their content into a necessity.

Marketers who advertise using digital media should take note. Ingrid Lunden reports in a Techcrunch article (2014) that Internet ad spending is to reach 121 billion dollars in 2014. According to a study about Internet advertisement conducted by the Pew Research Center though, “about two-thirds (68%) of Internet users disapprove of search engines and websites tracking their online behavior for the purpose of ad targeting” (“Internet Users Don’t Like”, 2012). Thus, digital marketers should focus less on designing ads to place on websites and dedicate more time to creating beneficial content for their target consumer. Digital marketing content that gains interest organically beats out paid online advertisement. This is due in part to certain constraints that decrease the effectiveness of online advertisement.

A video created by the Wall Street Journal, inserted below, explains the process marketers go through when purchasing ad space online. It illustrates the negative side effects associated with advertising online.
Ultimately, achieving relevance in any digital environment stems down to creating valuable content. Successful digital content must set itself apart from the rest and adds value to the members of its digital environment. Publishers of digital content must remain cognizant of the various constraints and create their content accordingly.
References


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