The Internet Michael Plasmeier

The internet has revolutionized the publishing of information and has allowed for instantaneous collaboration around the world. The internet has shaped who I am by allowing me to access boundless amounts of knowledge, and contribute by publishing podcasts and articles. It has allowed me to create a sense of global community, in working on a large project, as part of an institution, and a private community with my friends. The internet allows everyone to do these things – it does not matter where you live or how old you are. On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Publishing

## From Anywhere

The internet has changed the world more than any other technology ever invented. Information that used to be hard to find is available from almost anywhere in the world. I can be sitting in the middle of the Charles River and read the most recent bill before Congress on my cell phone. Only 30 years ago, I would have had to be in Washington, go to a Federal Deposit Library, or subscribe to an expensive publication in order to find information. In any case, I would have to search through thousands of pages of documents. Today I can simply go to THOMAS, the Library of Congress’ database and search for the terms I am looking for.

## Mash Ups

However, THOMAS is difficult to use if one does not know what one is looking for. But the internet helps in this situation as well; anyone can clone THOMAS and present the information in a different form. *Opencongress.org* from the Sunlight Foundation builds on THOMAS by highlighting the important issues currently before Congress and allowing people to discuss these issues. It has an easy user interface that shows the timeline a bill must follow, as well as recent actions taken. It searches the internet for related content and organizes news clippings for each bill. It has three summaries of the bills, an official one written by the Congressional Research Service, a summary written by Sunlight’s staff to be more approachable, and a wiki summary, written by users. *Opencongress.org* has a form where constituents can write their members of Congress with their points of view. These mash ups are not just limited to organizations; they can also be created by individuals. *Govtrack.us* is run by a Ph.D. student and has some of the same features as *Opencongress.org*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Cost

A Ph.D. student can afford to run the site because the cost of web publishing is so low. A basic web hosting package from 1and1 starts at $3.99 and includes a domain name and enough bandwidth of hundreds of thousands for visitors. For a Facebook application with a million users, a $300/month server is needed. The cost to run that server is less than 1 penny a month per 30 users.

This cost is almost negligible and far lower than the cost of printed material. The Post Office estimates the cost of production and postage of a printed brochure at $0.4764 per copy with a run of 100,000 pieces.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is more than 1,500 times greater the cost.

The marginal cost of publishing material onto the internet is almost zero. Anyone can do it.

## Fixed in Stone

Furthermore, published material cannot be changed after it has been created. If a spelling error is found, then the entire run must be reprinted. Publishing also has a lead time. For some publications this is a month or more in advance. The MIT course catalog is static when it has been printed. If a professor changes his class, the information will now be out of date. The internet does not have these issues; people will always have the latest information.

## The Long Tail

Printed material is charged by the page. Each extra page costs a few more cents. On the internet there is no such limit. This has led to what is called the long tail.[[4]](#footnote-4) In a bookstore, there is a limited amount of floor space. Rent in downtown areas and upscale shopping malls is expensive. Only a certain number of books can be squeezed into the store. Furthermore, a store will only draw people from a few miles around. Thus a book must appeal to a certain audience and sell a certain number of copies. On the internet, a book that only sells one copy per bookstore equivalent still has an acceptable number of sales. If the item is digital, such as an e-book, the cost of storing the item is almost negligible. If one person buys the e-book every week nationwide, the author makes a small amount of money. There is almost no limit to the content that can be published. And, because there is no limit, there is no gatekeeper who can decide what gets published. This has led to popular sites such as *icanhazcheeseburger.com*, a site which displays humorous captions over photos of cats, which has 20 staffers and millions of viewers.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## My projects

I have used the internet extensively in my projects. My site, *theplaz.com*, has led people to hire me for work. It has enabled me to publish both the interesting and not-so-interesting things I have written. I have a weekly audio podcast, *theweeklyspin.com*, where I talk about the latest tech news with some of my friends. The show costs us almost nothing to produce, certainly less than $50/year. In high school I produced a TV show called Tecker 911. Tecker 911 covered basic technology topics for laypersons. In addition to being aired on public access cable, every episode of the show is available worldwide, on-demand on the internet. Even though the show is over, I can still make the episodes available. The distribution costs a few dollars a month. I did not have to convince any gatekeepers to approve my projects. I used the limitless nature of the internet to try new things. Some of my projects worked out, others did not. The cost of trying was very low; even if the project failed, the experience of doing it was valuable.

# Collaboration

## Easy Access

On May 14, 2005, I read the article on the Hoover Dam and made some small changes.[[6]](#footnote-6) I was interacting with a larger community at the age of 14. Wikipedia has a lot of policies and rules. Policies are hammered out transparently online. Things fit into neat categories and are branded with templates. Large queues exist of things to fix. It all works in a mechanical sense. The community works together to build this big project. I was participating at age 14. At one point in time, I checked the copyright status of images. It introduced me to the issues of copyright and copyleft. Today, I know much more about the copyright process and why it’s important.

## Wikipedia

Wikipedia itself is an interesting project on the internet. Just a small fraction of one percent of readers has ever edited it, but it contains one of the greatest collections of knowledge ever created.[[7]](#footnote-7) It has over 3 million articles, and has far more depth than any other single information source.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both Encarta and Encyclopedia Britannica’s articles on the Hoover Dam are less than 1/10 the length of Wikipedia’s.[[9]](#footnote-9) Wikipedia has articles on a wide range of subjects, including many where little information exists elsewhere online. For example, the railroad behind MIT is called the “Grand Junction Railroad” and it has a 3 page article on Wikipedia, including a section on an event that happened within the week.[[10]](#footnote-10) Because of Wikipedia’s depth and acceptance, it has forced existing conventional encyclopedias to go out of business. Microsoft’s Encarta will be shutting down this October.[[11]](#footnote-11)

## Anyone can Post

On a blog, anyone can post his or her opinion. The cost is even lower, because blog hosting sites such as *blogger.com* and *wordpress.com* offer free blogs. The mainstream media no longer have the exclusive ability to reach a large audience. During the recent U.S. elections, many people commented and some even provided news. Blogs such as *huffingtonpost.com* have many authors and are among the most popular sites on the internet. According to Alexa, *huffingtonpost.com* is ranked #56 in the US by traffic.[[12]](#footnote-12) The site did not have to raise large amounts of money to build a printing press and distribution network; instead it grew naturally.

## Worldwide

This collaboration happens worldwide; with the internet it does not matter where you live. In the United States, I have access to many resources, which I would not have in other countries. But if I had a low-cost computer, such an XO-1 laptop, and access to the internet, I could read Wikipedia. In the U.S., the color your skin used to correlate strongly with the level of education you could receive. Today, ethnicity is far less of a factor in determining education level. However, place of birth is still a strong factor. The internet is changing that. Over the course of my life, the internet will let me collaborate with many smart people all over the world. This will lead to a richer life for me and everyone else. Smart people will not be limited by geographical boundries.

## Corporate Use

Companies use the collaborative power of the internet to advance their mission. At MIT, IS&T runs a wiki where community members can contribute their knowledge and read what other community members have posted. Personally, I am interested in using Palm Pre at MIT. To get started, I read the wiki article on the Pre.[[13]](#footnote-13) The article had information on how to get email working, but did not include a section on how to install certificates. I researched and experimented loading personal certificates onto the Pre, and I wrote the steps up in the wiki. Now others at MIT can also use certificates on the Palm Pre. I did not have to be a member of IS&T to update the wiki, and I most certainly did not have to submit my text to a book three months in advance to be published yearly.

## Interactivity

People use social networking sites, such as *facebook.com*, to stay in touch with each other on a private basis. I use Facebook both to coordinate with my friends on campus, as well as with my friends that live further away. Yesterday, I saw that my friend was busy and not looking to hang out just by checking his Facebook page. I did not have to interrupt him by calling. I can quickly chat back and forth with multiple people either across the room, or across the world. There is no cost for these messages.

I can see at a glance what my friends are up to, not only on *facebook.com*, but increasingly on other sites as well*.* For instance, Kaleb is currently trying to set up a local teenage Republican club, and Charles misplaced his bike lock. Margaret’s birthday is today. Chris posted photos of his most recent boating outlet. I can comment on his photo and invite him to go sailing with me at MIT. I can see photos of a certain person, not only taken by that person, but photos taken by other people that have been tagged as containing that person. People can invite me to events using my real name, not an obscure username. I can keep my friends informed as to what I am up to with my status message. All of this happens in the realm of Facebook where things are published without much extra effort and I can see information from friends I would not normally check up on. These interactions build a stronger sense of community between my friends and me.

*The internet powers so much of what we do today; along with powering what I have done.*

*It is so cheap to publish and share anything, instantly, worldwide.*

*It’s changed my life, and the world forwever.*

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=On_the_Internet,_nobody_knows_you%27re_a_dog&oldid=316605448> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.govtrack.us/about.xpd> Retrieved 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.usps.com/directmail/planyourapproach/budget.htm?from=planyourapproach&page=startbudget> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1916286,00.html> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Contributions&dir=prev&target=ThePlaz> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/2008/11/the-miraculous.html> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Statistics> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. All retrieved 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Grand_Junction_Railroad_and_Depot_Company&oldid=315863142>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://encarta.msn.com/guide_page_FAQ/FAQ.html> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/huffingtonpost.com> 2009-09-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://wikis.mit.edu/confluence/display/MobileDevices/Mobile+Devices+Wiki> MIT Certificates required. 2009-09-27.

    Heading and body typeset in Cambria; footnotes typeset in Calibri; produced in Microsoft Word 2010 Technical Preview [↑](#footnote-ref-13)