The Power of Many

*How the Living Web Is Transforming Politics, Business, and Everyday Life*
The Power of Many

*How the Living Web Is Transforming Politics, Business, and Everyday Life*

Christian Crumlish
To Briggs, my one and only
## Contents

- **Acknowledgments** vii
- **Foreword** xi
- **Introduction** xii

**Chapter 1:** People Get Ready 1  
**Chapter 2:** All Politics Is Personal 21  
**Chapter 3:** Getting Off the Couch 65  
**Chapter 4:** Meet the Neighbors 101  
**Chapter 5:** Visible Means of Support 123  
**Chapter 6:** CultureJamming the Hollywood Megalith 137  
**Chapter 7:** Doing Business with Strangers 161  
**Chapter 8:** Lonely Hearts’ Club Bands 189  
**Chapter 9:** Tom Sawyer Whitewashes a Fence 209  

**Glossary** 235  
**Index** 259
Acknowledgments

Since the early 1990s, when I started writing full time and began relying on Internet access to connect me with employers and colleagues, I’ve experimented with many different approaches to collaboration, often working in multidisciplinary teams with the various members spread out all over the globe. Today it’s hard to accomplish anything, in the workplace or outside of it, without the help of others whom you may rarely see or even speak to.

This book involved the efforts and support of over a hundred people, and I’m desperately afraid of forgetting to thank someone. If I have left out your name, I apologize!

My circle of acquaintances, friends, and colleagues expanded dramatically after I wrote some Internet primers in the mid ’90s. I watched the Net become adopted more widely around the globe. My books were sold abroad and translated into scores of languages, and I received email from places farther and farther afield. By the late ’90s, I was getting messages from readers in places like China and the Kurdish protectorate in northern Iraq and living more and more of my social life online.

I’d like to thank Delshad Fakhreddin in Erbil, Iraq, who started out as one of my readers and who has become, through the agency of the Web, a close friend of mine whom I hope to meet someday.

My experiments with web publishing and content strategy eventually led to the new media formats powered by instant gratification: blogs and wikis. (More about these two oddly named concepts later.) Indirectly, that led to this book.

Pete Gaughan, my editor, and Dan Brodnitz, my publisher, conceived of this project and asked me to write it. Without the opportunity they gave me, this book wouldn’t have come into being. They made the whole thing possible and shepherded it through my publishing house, Sybex, with the support of
Rodnay Zaks, Sybex’s founder and president, and Alan Hanrahan, vice president of sales and marketing. Rodnay, in fact, had inspired some of my original thinking along these lines in a talk he gave at a Waterside conference a few years ago on the subject of an always-on Internet that he refers to as the Evernet. Alan also steered my thinking in several fruitful directions, helping me find the topics and themes that would be of value to sales, marcom, and customer-relationship professionals. Everyone at Sybex was remarkably supportive throughout this effort despite a very high-pressure schedule. In fact, the enthusiasm for the book at Sybex certainly buoyed me through the most difficult stretches of writing, interviewing, and rewriting.

Beyond Pete and Dan and Rodnay and Alan, the other publishing professionals without whose help I couldn’t have ever written this book include marketing specialist Cammie Allen, publicist Susannah Greenberg, copyeditor Sarah Lemaire, production editor Mae Lum, compositor Maureen Forys at Happenstance Type-O-Rama, proofreaders Laurie O’Connell and Nancy Riddiough, and indexer Ted Laux. Photographer Robert Birnbach took the author photo. Mary Hodder contributed an invaluable peer review.

As I noted, Pete and Dan thought up the idea for the book, but why did they ask me to write it? I am not a sociologist, nor am I a computer scientist, nor a scholar of social networks for that matter. I majored in philosophy at Princeton and entered the workforce during a recession in the late 1980s. But I grew up reading about computerized fictional futures and messed around with computers from grade school on. I built a computer in a cigar box in 1974, “designed” another computer that doubled as a fortune telling machine, and started learning BASIC on a Digital PDP 11/30 running RSTS around the same time—we shared the computer with other New York schools and dialed in from a thermal printer over an acoustic coupler modem running at about two baud, I should imagine. So I wasn’t computerphobic and quickly found that the workplace would reward me for fiddling around with DOS, Lotus 1-2-3, and so on.

I got my start in publishing with Sybex, hired by David Kolodney, a mentor who now contributes to my political weblog Edgewise, and Joanne Cuthbertson, who also gave me some of my other key opportunities coming up. Others I’d like to thank from my computer-book publishing days include Eric Stone, Bob Myren, Richard Mills, Jim Compton, Dave Clark, and Cheryl Applewood.
I'd like to thank the people at Netcom, who provided me with my first Unix shell account and my first Internet email address; the members of the first online community I became attached to, Usenet’s rec.music.gdead; as well as the merry punsters (never trust a punster), the Bay Area taper’s group, antiweb, and the many remarkable people I’ve met on The WELL.

I thank all the contributors to Enterzone, Coffeehouse, Telegraph, and Mediajunkie; Boris Khadinov at Edgewise; Andrew Bayer at Radio Free Blogistan; and Elizabeth Spiers from The Kicker.

Thank you to weblog software entrepreneurs and leaders, including Ben and Mena Trott and Anil Dash of Six Apart; Evan Williams, Meg Hourihan, Paul Bausch, and others from Pyra; and Dave Winer of UserLand and Scripting News fame. In addition, I’d like to thank Joshua Schachter of Delicious and Memepool, whose relentless inventiveness astounds me, as well as Matt Haughey, Nick Denton, Duncan Riley, and others pushing out the boundaries of the blogosphere.

Thanks to my favorite pundit bloggers as well, including Atrios, Kos, David Neiwert, Taegan Goddard, Kevin Drum, Adam Felbers, Brad DeLong, Daniel Drezner, Oliver Willis, and Joshua Micah Marshall. I am no doubt forgetting many here, but I mustn’t forget Ward Cunningham!

I’d like to acknowledge the inspiration of Governor Howard Dean and Joe Trippi, the campaign manager who turned conventional wisdom on its head.

The many experts, wise folks, and online veterans who offered their time to me; answered interview questions via phone, email, IM, and blog; reviewed chapters; or otherwise offered suggestions and feedback include: Jerome Armstrong, Nick Arnett, Levi Asher, Gene Austin, The One True b!X, Matt Bailey, Andrew Baio, Vinay Bhagat, Joan Blades, Felicia Borrego, danah boyd, Justin Burke, Mal Burnstein, Marc Canter, Ed Cone, Vicki Cosgrove, Laramie Crocker, Brian Dear, Neil Drumm, Julie Eddy, Mary Fifield, Christopher Filkins, Erica Fox, Richard Frankel, Seth Godin, Jeff Green, Gwen Harlow, Scott Heiferman, Mary Hodder, Taylor House, Aldon Hynes, Joichi Ito, Eden James, Paul Jene, Clay Johnson, Steven Berlin Johnson, Peter Kamali, Roger Karraker, George Kelly, Rick Klau, Josh Koenig, Elizabeth Lane Lawley, Jon Lebkowsky, Om Malik, Matt Margolis, Ross Mayfield, Susan Mernit, Judith Meskill, Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, Craig Newmark, Freeman Ng, Christine

In some ways, this book can be read as a guided, distributed conversation among the above-named people, with me merely conducting the discussion. While reviewing the galleys, I realized that one way to skim the book is simply to read the numerous epigraphs; they serve as a kind of executive summary of the (for the most part) pithy sound bites of bloggers. Each chapter also ends with a set of links to further resources online for those who wish to read the source materials in full. And in fact, I’ll be publishing some complete interviews with some of the contributors listed above as well as with additional guests at the book’s website (http://www.thepowerofmany.com).

I’d like to thank my former agent Danielle Jatlow, who did this deal for me and always believed I could write this type of book, and my current agent Margot Maley at Waterside Productions, who’s one of the best. I also want to thank Matt Wagner and Bill Gladstone who represented me ably in the past, as well as David Fugate, Kimberly Valentini, and Maureen Maloney at Waterside, who have helped me in numerous ways.

Thanks to friends who have inspired me, including David Gans, Rita Hurault, Nicholas Meriwether, Ted Nadeau, and Martha Conway, and my family members, especially Mom and Dad, Jennifer, Arthur, Peter, Sara, Caleb, and Sam. I’d like to also thank my extended Crumlish family, some of whom I reconnected with in researching this book, as well as T.J. Spitznas and the whole Spitznas side of my family.

Most of all, dedication notwithstanding, please allow me to thank Briggs Nisbet, who proofread all the galleys to protect me from my own worst excesses, who has given me the kind of support that most writers only dream of, and who made room for me to go a little crazy in order to get this thing done in time.
Foreword

Ten years ago, a handful of people were using the Internet, convinced that someday, people would use the Net to change everything—business, social relationships, and eventually, governing. It would be everyone’s printing press.

Ten years ago, I was evangelizing the Internet at Charles Schwab, telling folks that the brokerage business would someday rely on it. I was one of those suggesting that it would change everything.

We all kept at it for a few years while technological and economic cycles converged. More people saw the potential of the Net and got really excited. The Internet, and the “new economy,” got badly overhyped. A lot of money was invested, people got a lot of good jobs, and a lot of people made a lot of money…much of which existed only on paper.

If you believe that the Net could be everyone’s printing press, this was pretty good. Lots of technology got developed and then deployed, resulting in relatively low-cost systems and Net connections. This happened fairly fast, at least in historical terms.

However, the focus on making lots of money fast was a distraction. The industry forgot that the Internet must serve real human needs.

People started to realize that the “new economy” was a bit of a mass hallucination—that it wasn’t fulfilling its promise, relative to the hype. The bubble burst; a lot of people lost jobs; a lot of people lost savings.

On the other hand, the infrastructure remained intact, and a lot of people trained in new technologies moved across the world.

People who believe in the use of the Net have kept on plugging away, using it to change the way we address everyday needs, to tell people what conventional media neglects, and to change the nature of governance, possibly everywhere.
This is a slow, organic process that is now occasionally erupting into the press, the Dean campaign being the best example.

In *The Power of Many*, Christian Crumlish describes a lot of the ways people are using the Net to change the world right now—small efforts, large efforts—showing what we all can do with everyone’s printing press. Take a look. Find something that works for you and do it, change it, fix it now.

—Craig Newmark

Founder, craigslist.org

June 2004
Introduction

The living part of the Web—the constantly-being-updated part—is reaching a critical mass. Sure, it’s early days yet when it comes to the Internet and society. We are still living through the dawn of electronic internetworking, still learning the rules of the game. Across the planet, a small proportion of people—roughly 10 percent—are active users of the Internet, but that fraction keeps growing. More and more people know people in their own personal networks of friends and family, acquaintances and trusted colleagues, who are involved in some sort of social network with an online component, or who are getting some of their news or some of their civic engagement through digitally organized groups.

The living Web changes every day. It is not the static web of billboards and brochures but a dynamic web of people’s voices. It is born from the same group-building impulses that we evolved on the savannas, translated via the magic of remote and electronic communications formats such as mailing lists and instant messaging and persistent archived discussion boards and forwarded petitions and peer-to-peer networks and software and weblogs into a living, changing, growing, evolving web of people working together to improve a neighborhood or change the world.

We are at another major turning point in the way people are using the online world to organize their human relationships and their involvement in society. In the run-up to this year’s presidential election, it became clear that new ways of using the Web were becoming de rigueur among political candidacies and with activists, but the trend far outstrips politics and neighborhood causes; once you start looking, it shows signs of entering into nearly every aspect of community life.

Is this really any different? People were discussing things online with the PLATO system in the 1970s. The first what’s-new-on-the-Web websites
around 1991 were already functioning as weblogs. There have been mailing lists as long as there has been email. This is all true.

What’s different now is the increasing adoption of online communication by wider circles of, for the lack of a better word, ordinary people—as opposed to the academics, computer adepts, and military people who populated Arpanet and the early days of the Internet. The proverbial grandparent is using ofoto.com to share family photographs.

The living Web is scaling up, and it’s accelerating. You may safely ignore it today, but in a few months to a year you are going to find this topic inescapable.

My goal with this book is to identify the trends and some of the new methods and techniques that people are using to connect with each other online and accomplish real effects in the world, so that you can take the pattern to heart and start seeing where it applies in your own life: in your own work, at your job, in your network, with your customers or suppliers or colleagues (or students, or relatives, or your motorcycle club, and so on).

I’ve been studying, analyzing, and experimenting with online media for over a decade, writing about technology and consulting with business and nonprofits (and now political campaigns). I keep up with emerging technology, and I’m not afraid of jargon, but I’m much more interested in how people end up making use of technology than in the whys and wherefores of the engineering involved.

With this book, I try to help you get a handle on what’s changing and what’s new and how it’s going to affect you.

Tech startups have popularized a number of vivid slang-y expressions that have crossed over into the regular business world, such as “we drank the Kool-Aid” (meaning we’ve become believers in this new technology or business idea) or “we have to eat our own dog food” (meaning we need to use our own technology or our customers won’t trust it). In writing this book, I drank the Kool-Aid and I’ve been eating the dog food. The research, writing, editing, and review of the material in this book has largely taken place over the Internet—in email, on weblogs, on social network software systems, in instant messages—and with the help of more than 50 people who sat for interviews, reviewed chapters, offered suggestions, and otherwise helped me sift through my pile of half-baked ideas and helped with the baking. In the final week, I was passing the manuscript of Chapter 2 around many of the key players for and against Howard
Dean’s primary campaign, getting last-minute corrections of chronology and other important minutiae.

I’m assuming that you have some passing familiarity with the Internet, especially email but also at least with the World Wide Web. I don’t assume that you follow politics closely or that you are an expert in any of the topics discussed in the book (activism, neighborhood community activities, self-help, art, online dating, or business networking) but I do expect that you’ll be able to recognize the patterns I’m talking about and see where they apply in your own life. I’ve included a glossary of technical terms at the end of the book so anytime you see a three-letter acronym (such as RSS) or any unfamiliar jargon, you can flip to the back to get a brief definition, some basic grounding in the concept, or pointers to more information on the Web.

The book has an online presence (of course, at http://www.thepowerofmany.com) and a weblog for collecting links and commentary that extends back to 2003 and should continue until the topic has become second nature to us all. A collaborative “wiki” (whiteboard) website will enable us to collect corrections, requests for glossary entries, and further elaborations and commentary from readers and colleagues.

You can also keep up with further developments related to the living Web and its impact in the real world, discuss the book with other readers, contribute to the glossary or request new definitions, suggest areas of research that we should be aware of, and discuss social networking online. I’d like to extend the same invitation to you as I did to Mary Hodder (who became this book’s key peer reviewer) in a Berkeley café at the conclusion of a three-hour interview about the focus of this book: “I hope we continue this conversation for the rest of our lives.”
Chapter 1  People Get Ready

So, anyway, dinner. It was a great reminder of the real-world rewards of this new electronic community I’ve become a part of. Allan and I had a great time talking, laughing, eating, and sharing a bottle of wine. That kind of experience cements a friendship in a way that instant messenger just can’t do. I don’t use technology for the sake of using technology—at least, I try not to. I use it to enhance the things that I care about in my life—friends, family, my research. Yesterday afternoon I spoke to my kids over iChat audio. I arranged to meet Allan using email and IM. And I participated in great discussions about my areas of research interest during presentations. But all of those spill over into the real world, and I use them to enhance the real world, not replace it.

—Elizabeth Lane Lawley, “Step Away from the Laptop”

The phone rang; it was Catherine Saint Louis, who introduced herself as calling from the Sunday New York Times Magazine and asked to speak to my partner, Briggs Nisbet. Great, I thought, another solicitation; at least they didn’t call her “Mr. Briggs Nisbet.” But, no, Catherine told me that she edits the Lives column, that they were doing a special issue on landscaping in two weeks, that she’d been reading Briggs’ gardening blog, True Dirt, and did I think Briggs would be interested in writing a piece for her column in the magazine?
I nearly passed out from shock and stammered that I suspected that she would indeed be interested and here’s her work number, her work email, her personal email, and my email address. Oh, you don’t need my address? Of course you don’t, sorry about that. No, that’s fine, bye.

Over the next five days, Catherine and Briggs collaborated via email and cell phone on three different versions of the column until it was just so.

What does this have to do with the power of many or the living Web? I asked Briggs to ask Catherine how she found *True Dirt*. Catherine had wanted a personal insight for the Lives column. She thought that searching the Internet for weblogs on gardening might help her find a suitable columnist.

She googled for something like “gardening blogs” to find a writer for the Sunday ever-lovin’ *New York Times Magazine*. She trusted the Internet to help her find a suitable writer? Interestingly, the chain that led to the call went through a web-archived article from the *Boston Globe* (owned by the same company that owns the *Times*) on garden blogs that listed *True Dirt* in its short list of recommended sites at the end of the article.

How did that author find *True Dirt*? Perhaps because of some of the other people who publish their thoughts about gardening or nature or food or related topics on the Web, some of whom sometimes link to *True Dirt*. How did they find it? Because of promotional efforts online and word of mouth from *True Dirt*’s publisher: a tiny web operation that consists mainly of me and whoever else is helping out with the current front-burner projects. Which means mostly me.

*True Dirt*, written by Briggs and Richard Frankel, is part of a network of sites presented as a group site at Telegraph.nu. It is an example of niche journalism in the old-fashioned sense of journal writing and an example of what is sometimes semifacetiously called “nanopublishing.” Nanopublishing is niche publishing managed with lightweight content-handling systems that users like using, including blogs and wikis, but usually at the moment blogs.

The quality of the writing at our sites and the pertinence of the material to its subject matter is apt enough to attract the sort of people who notice stuff on the Web, link to it, and keep running logs (or blogs) of links, insights, interesting thoughts, and notes—that is, people who take note of their surroundings.
and sometimes remark on it soon after making observations, usually in the form of a sequential log. Those people have at least occasionally linked to us, and we point to each other, and we are thus in some ways like the bogus “link farms” used to try to game Google’s page rank system. But in our case, the sites are real, the domains are distinct, and the authors are many.

By hosting *True Dirt* on Mediajunkie, I helped ensure that Briggs’ writing would have a better chance of being noticed by the larger network through which certain bridge nodes connect my various small cliques to the wider Internet culture of early adopters. It also helps connect to what are sometimes called the influentials, the people whose sites offer trend-tracking clues to mainstream media (and other sales, advertising, marketing, publicity, and communications professionals), the freelance meme watchers of the living Web: the independent bloggers.

**In My Day, We Shared Music via Snail**

When I first got on the Internet more than a decade ago, I did so by using my modem to dial up to a service called Netcom. Once connected, I found myself at a command line. A few geeky friends taught me how to use the mail programs (“elm” and “Pine” were my options, or the even more bare-bones “mail”) and how to use the “man” command to read manuals and learn about other command-line options.

This was before the Web had a graphically driven interface available (Mosaic and later Netscape were still more than a year away). Somehow I managed to stumble onto Usenet, a worldwide distributed network of networks hosting discussions on any topic imaginable. I was a fan of the Grateful Dead but had few nearby friends with whom I could discuss the band, so I quickly discovered the rec.music.gdead newsgroup, which became my first online community “hangout.”

It was great to be able to connect to people all over the world who shared my interests and to ask questions and share information that otherwise would have mandered unaired in the back of our minds or on someone’s shelves. But what truly amazed me was the first time I opened my mailbox to find a package containing cassette tapes. The tapes featured a recording of my first
Dead concert—a show in Saratoga, New York in 1984. As I stood there with a physical artifact in my hand, it dawned on me that throughout this Internet cloud—sitting in front of their own computers and typing messages to the same forums—were in fact real flesh-and-blood people. It took something happening in the real world, an actual object being sent through the so-called snail mail, and my chance to hear once again music that I’d heard for the first time twenty years ago to bring this point home to me. I immediately got online and posted something silly to the effect of “Wow, I just found out you all are real!”

Over time, I started running into people at Dead concerts in the Bay Area, whom I knew only from being online and that was another revelation. Some people were exactly like they seemed online. Others were very different from the personas they projected. In each case, I had to expand my mental file to add new information about these people: what their faces looked like, how they stood, what they did with their hands while talking, and the timbre of their voices. In each case, a virtual person became a real person.

These were my first clues that the true power of the Internet would be unleashed only when online interaction crossed over into the so-called real world.

By the way, I realize it doesn’t help my credibility much to talk about this love of Grateful Dead music, but I’m told by researchers such as danah boyd that the online world frequently caters to otherwise marginalized parts of one’s public identity. When I interviewed boyd, I told her about my involvement in the DeadHead Usenet group when I would ordinarily not mention that aspect of my online experience around hip younger Bay Area folks, for fear of being stereotyped as dope-smoking hippie with flowery aesthetics and half-assed politics. I think I did this deliberately to expose my own vulnerability, my own marginalized identity, even as I risked a stereotype of me clicking into shape in her mind.

The other reason I mentioned it was because I had just been through the second meaningful online community experience of my life—this time with the Dean campaign—and I wasn’t the only person to remark on the Dead-show atmosphere at some of the big Dean rallies and events in California last year.
Who Was Howard Dean and How Did He Go So Far?

Before I get too far into this, I should probably get my biases out on the table. This book isn’t about my political opinions or my ideology. The lessons I am discovering about how the living Web works, how it’s changing group behavior and organizing techniques and politics, have nothing to do with the political spectrum of left to right (and perhaps a bit to do with the spectrum of decentralization vs. hierarchy). Nonetheless, my own experience is relevant both because it informs my ideas about what is changing, and because it will enable readers who don’t share my political leanings to factor out any bias that I am unable to eliminate from my point-of-view.

I volunteered for the local grassroots group working to support Howard Dean in the Democratic primary in 2003 and early 2004. (I live in Oakland, California, so for me that meant East Bay for Dean.) Through the course of my involvement, I performed a wide range of political organizing and activism roles and ended up on the local organizing committee. After Dean lost the nomination, the group that I belong to changed its name to East Bay for Democracy, and its work continues with goals that still include electoral activities but will continue beyond the upcoming November election.

One of the hats I wore in the thick of the campaign was “giver of the fundraising pitch” at houseparties. (Because of a loophole in FEC regulations, it’s easier to host a fundraiser in a person's house than it is in a public accommodation, so houseparties proliferated to raise the insane amount of money required to keep a national campaign in the game.) This involved attending houseparties, answering guests’ questions about the Dean candidacy, and giving a speech making the case for supporting Dean financially and evangelizing the idea of a $100 revolution (more about that in Chapter 2, “All Politics Is Personal”).

At one such party, my host told me how he got involved in volunteering in the primary. He attended a meetup in San Francisco to learn more about the candidate in March 2003, twenty months before the election and a full year before the California primary. He noted that by the next meetup he attended, a month later, twice as many people were present, and that the growth continued exponentially all that summer.
Once the meeting had been called to order, the attendees were given a chance to introduce themselves and discuss the political issues that most affected them. (This was something called “The Great American Conversation,” because a large part of the effort involved getting people to meet in person in coffee-houses and living rooms, meet their neighbors, and start rebuilding the American community one block at a time.) After the introductions, though, came the most striking activity of the event, from my host’s point-of-view. The meeting organizers—who had obtained their materials to run the meeting by downloading position papers from the DeanforAmerica.com website, by participating in a conference call, and by signing up and receiving packages in the mail—handed out packages to each of the attendees who were willing. Each package contained the names and addresses of two undecided Democratic voters in Iowa who were eligible to participate in the January 2004 Iowa caucuses. Also in the packages were stationery, envelopes, and stamps.

Participants were asked to write personal letters to their two assigned recipients, telling them in their own words why they supported Howard Dean for president and why they hoped that the Iowan would brave the cold and snow, attend the caucus, and stand for Dean. My host was impressed not merely that the campaign wasn’t scripting or controlling or reviewing the contents of these letters before they were sealed and sent. (Yes, they provided some suggested “talking points,” but each participant was free to send whatever message they deemed worthy of committing to paper.) What blew him away was that the campaign had leveraged the Internet—that famous disembodied tool of virtual connections and anonymous interaction—to get a group of local people together in the same room and to motivate them to hand-write snail mail to send to people in another state, one with a much more crucial early nominating event than California’s March primary.

“My hand was cramping up,” he told me. “I can’t remember the last time I wrote one letter, let alone two. Plus, I was sort of worried about what the other people were writing. There was this one guy next to me who looked horrendous. I couldn’t imagine he was going to convince an Iowa farmer to support Dean, but I was struck by the trust the campaign was showing in us volunteers.”

The Internet is finally starting to become an integrated tool for face-to-face communication and directed, intentional, “real-world” actions. That combination of virtual organizing and physical activity, of structured top-down direction and
fringe-driven, self-organized, spontaneous organization, that marriage of order and chaos, began to be recognized as Dean rocketed from an obscure dark horse insurgent to the presumptive frontrunner before a single primary vote had been cast. His was a revolutionary new story about how people could use these technologies to connect to each other, take action, and effect change in these media-driven, TV-anesthetized times.

This book, then, is an examination of the lessons that can be learned from what has worked and what has not worked. It’s an attempt to tease out the intertwining sinews of networked telecommunications with real minds and bodies, and an attempt to look ahead at how these enabling technologies might be leveraged most effectively as they become ever more embedded in our day-to-day lives.

Usenet traditionally scheduled “burgermunches” as a way for their participants to meet in person; the pioneering online service The Well learned that its community coalesced best after parties where people had a chance to meet face to face. This lesson continues to trickle out to others trying to take advantage of the unprecedented reach of the Internet. Without embodied action, without face-to-face interaction, and without people meeting up together in place and time, the Internet might as well be a dream world. As the interconnectedness of the Web reaches into the mundane details of ordinary reality and causes actual bodies to share space, real conversations to take place using lips and tongues, heard by ears and processed by auditory apparatus in brains—that’s when the magic starts to happen.

The Dean nomination run failed in its principal goal—but, as craigslist founder Craig Newmark said at a recent conference, “We’re still talking about it.” In the aftermath of that campaign, a thousand flowers are blooming or dying back in the form of new organizations—from skeletal websites to large functioning networks of people—that have emerged in the wake of the Dean for America (DFA) project to emulate those parts that worked so well to get people up off their couches and out into the streets.

When Did Everyone Get a Blog?

So why has it taken so long for these lessons to be applied in the real worlds of politics, civic communities, activism, and other forms of real-world organizing?
For one thing, in the long scheme of things, the Internet is still young, still new. In time, a generation will grow up for whom the Internet has always been there. These people will be natives of the Internet, and they will be intimate with its folkways and fluent in its protocols. For now, many of us are still grasping at these new models of interaction and still trying to draw analogies from our earlier lives and imagine and invent ways to connect up the virtual world with the real world.

And to be perfectly honest, the Internet and computers are still too difficult for many people to use. There are still multiple, overlapping digital divides. There’s the matter of generation, as well as economic class and other factors as well. My parents are still not sure what they’re looking at when they’re looking at the monitor of their Apple Macintosh. What to me is naturally a modal dialog box is to them just another rectangle among many on a screenful of confusing metaphors.

So we still have a long way to go just to make the basic tools of online interaction accessible to everyone. A perfect case in point is blogging. Blogging has been around in one form or another as long as the Web has been around (and the Web was invented in 1991). But the strange new word “blog” wasn’t coined until 1999, the buzz didn’t start till 2000, and the first big wave of political bloggers didn’t get traction until late 2001 in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Blogging didn’t come into its own as a political communications tool until 2003 with the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. The hype continues to expand outward concentrically, yet blogging still isn’t easy or intuitive enough for everyone’s grandmother to do (or to care about or want to get involved with).

Rebecca Blood, who writes a long-running weblog called Rebecca’s Pocket and published a guide to blogging called The Weblog Handbook, coined a “law” to describe the way the blog “revolution” perpetually seems to have just hit the mainstream to whomever has just discovered it:

Blood’s Law of Weblog History: The year you discovered weblogs and/or started your own is ‘The Year Blogs Exploded.’ Corollary: The year after you started your blog is the beginning of ‘Weblog Permanent September.’

Anil’s Corollary: The first weblog you read is the one that invented the medium.
But the power of blogging lies in its ease. Since the Web arrived, it was theoretically possible for just about anybody to create their own website and publish their own writing freely online. The Web has been heralded as a potential communications revolution, possibly unequaled since Gutenberg and the movable type printing press. But the promise of online self-publishing has fallen short of the hype, because of the technical barriers. I had to learn Unix command-line hieroglyphics to send my first email messages. Email didn’t catch on in a big way until there were nice graphical point-and-click interfaces and seamless Internet connections backing everything up. In the same way, personal online self-publishing didn’t reach its full potential until the advent of easy, forms-driven, push-button publishing interfaces and, perhaps more importantly, easy automatic publish-and-subscribe syndication formats that enable a global conversation to emerge.

The presidential election of 2004 will be the first in which every major candidate’s website had a weblog and in which bloggers played the traditional Washington-based pundit driving the debate and determined what topics of discussion were on the table.

Perhaps more importantly, the next presidency, regardless of who wins this November, will be the first to be blogged by thousands of ordinary people from Day One. Bloggers will scrutinize cabinet choices and transition-team appointments and start organizing to support or oppose the president’s policies even before the inauguration.

By themselves, blogs don’t create communities any more than Usenet did or email would. They represent, however, a great leap forward in the ease of people expressing themselves, communicating, and meeting each other online. As a result, they are a critical enabling technology for the kind of real-world impact that concerns me in this book.

In fact, blogs are just the best current tool that supports freer personal expression. “Disintermediating” the mass-broadcast middleman that has dominated global communication in the previous century and supplementing (if not replacing) it with people-to-people communications channels that will eventually yield their own media forms, perhaps more collaborative or more granularly nuanced.
This new form already does a better job of incorporating multiple viewpoints than one-size-fits-all broadcast media, and blogging also favors participatory reading and writing of news and analysis instead of passive reception of information monopolized by experts, pundits, and people who can afford to make a career or a hobby of covering one particular beat in endless detail. Many-to-many communication on the living Web is a moving target if there ever was one. More and more, books and even weblog entries begin to look like snapshots of waterfalls. Frozen for an instant, the picture gives much valuable insight into the dynamics of that moment, but it’s the unending flow of water that conveys the full story.

There’s Something Happening Here—
What It Is Ain’t Exactly Clear

We shouldn’t overlook the importance of music and other media and filesharing. They have proven the concept for the emergent, cellular ways that people are organizing themselves. Back in my online Deadhead days, when we wanted to exchange music, we posted offers or requests to newsgroups, we exchanged email messages agreeing on trades, and we sent each other tapes filled with music. That way the concentric circles expanded.

Even then, we had some inkling that this was going to change. Digital audio tapes (DATs) were already popular and the prospect of recordable CDs was known to be in the offing. To anyone who thought hard about it for a little while, it was clear that some combination of fatter pipes (more bandwidth) and better compression formats was eventually going to create a circumstance where it would be possible to send or distribute music directly online, without the intervening analog media of tape cassettes, stamped mailers, and U.S. Postal Service employees.

If anything, that day came sooner than we expected, with MP3 as a “good enough” digital format, and the advent of broadband Internet connections. By now, anyone plugged into the Net is aware of how Napster revolutionized music distribution, not simply because of the digital media technologies (there had already been websites like mp3.com and etree.com where the music was downloaded from centralized repositories), but because
of the revolutionary peer-to-peer model by which people could find each other’s music and share it freely without any intervening authority. Yes, Napster was stopped by the record companies, who, like the film companies today, saw a serious threat to their copyrights and their monopoly on distribution. But the filesharing model has continued in the form of endless variations such as Gnutella, KaZaA, and many others. And now an application called BitTorrent has taken the shared-download phenomenon a step further. There will be no stopping this revolution.

Mary Hodder writes a weblog and maintains a website called The Napsterization of Everything, in which she argues that this peer-to-peer revolution will extend far beyond music and other media sharing, and that it actually represents a new paradigm of person-to-person communication and networking. This is yet another of the ingredients in this ongoing revolution in self-organizing human communities.

Television Not Meeting Our Needs

“There is starting to be a critical mass of people online, and the tools are gradually becoming human-friendly enough to make it easy for people to join groups, write their thoughts, and connect to virtual communities. The question is, what needs are these new resources meeting?

We are leaving behind a century of mass media for which Americans (and, slowly, the rest of the world) have been trained to sit passively and consume entertainment as an audience. The fundamental difference between the Internet and older media networks is that the Internet is interactive. Everyone can be a producer just as everyone can be a consumer. This is not some utopian ideal that posits that everyone will become famous or make a living in entertainment or art or media, or that everyone’s soapbox or megaphone is just as big and loud and effective as everybody else’s. We will not see inequality erased in our lifetimes, if ever. There will always be people of differing means and abilities, those
who see and grasp and manipulate the possibilities offered by new technologies and those who are alienated by them and shun them.

The point is not that everyone gets to be famous so much as everyone is permitted a voice, can talk back, and speak truth to power.

In the last century, participation in public life in the United States has withered. There are fewer common spaces, fewer public areas, fewer town halls. Outside of intentional communities, it has become harder and harder for people to find each other as we lock ourselves away in our homes and turn on our television sets.

Internet analyst Clay Shirky wrote about the unmet promise of the Dean campaign in a seminal essay called “Exiting Deanspace.” In it, he noted that voting remains one of the human activities that is still explicitly tied to geography. In most other realms of human behavior, “culture matters, and since the 1970s, anyone who has looked at the cultural effects of the Internet has picked the same key element: the victory of affinity over geography. The like-minded can now gather from all corners and bask in the warmth of knowing you are not alone.”

But the Internet doesn’t destroy geography. There is nothing inherent in the Net’s freeing from the details of our physical location that prevents us from organizing along geographical lines as well. Shirky noted to me in a phone conversation that in the earlier days of the Net, when the population was sparser, it was more salient that one could find commonalities with people from farther away. If you were the only ostrich fancier in your small town, good luck finding people to come to your meeting. But get online and you could find a Usenet group, a web page, or a mailing list where you might be able to meet ostrich fanciers from around the globe.

This hasn’t changed. What has changed is that now there are large communities of neighbors who are all online. In some neighborhoods, it’s not unreasonable to expect many of the people who live up the street from you are also online. It turns out that online organizational tools and behaviors can supplement real-world networking, even when physical proximity is available.

By itself, the Internet doesn’t eliminate passivity. It is just as easy to turn on a computer and ignore your neighbor or your loved ones as it is to zone out in front of a TV. The one critical difference, however, is that operating the computer and
connecting to the Internet requires a degree of involvement that goes beyond reaching out with a remote control and changing the volume or the channel.

Furthermore, broadcasting functions on a one-to-many model, in which each individual station sends out a signal and the people within range have only two choices: to tune in or not. However, the Internet fundamentally facilitates an entirely different many-to-many model in which choices multiply and smaller groups of people—even smaller audiences—can coalesce around the performers, the issues, or the topics that interest them. Instead of ever-widening circles emanating from a single point, there are endless interlocking circles of various sizes, some of which connect with other circles and others which float freely.

The human urge to connect and form communities is as strong as ever, even as the public infrastructure that enables it has withered from disuse. All by themselves, Internet groups (mailing lists, Yahoo! Groups, newsgroups, websites, and so on) do not replace real-life community; they merely present what’s possible. They enable our minds to connect while our bodies are sedentary and uninvolved.

The online facilitated communities are created only when actions are involved. They are created when people rise up from their easy chairs, leave their homes, inconvenience themselves, discover the church basement or the community center, enter a stranger’s living room or fight City Hall.

It’s a commonplace online that unbridled arguments (sometimes called flame wars) arise more easily than in face-to-face conversation. The semi-anonymity of sitting behind a computer screen makes it easier to post denuded ASCII text calling someone a jerk or an idiot (or an “idiotarian”). It’s often said that people will insult each more readily this way, when in person they would be more likely to seek comity and behave like a mature human being. The detachment of a pure online existence permits us to evade the consequences of our bad behavior. It allows us to hit and run, to harm others verbally and then get up from the computer, make a sandwich, turn on the television, and forget what we said and who we hurt. If we know we will be seeing someone at church, on the playing field, or at a face-to-face meeting, we’re reminded of what being part of a human community really entails. We’re also reminded of the sensible self-imposed limits of free expression in a world, where we are all shoulder to shoulder, breathing the same air and laboring under the same—or equivalent—challenges and difficulties. Compassion is necessary when we are embodied.