EDITORIAL !

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Surviving in the Face of Abundance

Our world certainly seems to be filled to overflowing with media. To argue in favor of even more specialization and differentiation in a situation like this seems more than foolish – but still it is neither avoidable nor impossible.

Why is it accurate to speak of abundance in the context of media supply?

In the days when there was only ONE television channel in Germany and the SECOND was a sensational development, publishers were something like the High Priests of Culture because they produced BOOKS. The creeping devaluation set in as cheap licensed titles were offered and sold door-to-door like vacuum cleaners.

The increase in supply was accompanied by the fact that technologies such as the rotary press were economically interesting, because the markets were stable and unsaturated. Print runs were inflated by sales and marketing power; the sheer number of titles led to destructive competition since the markets simply couldn't accommodate everything that was being offered. Still, nobody was talking about a media glut – because *choice* was to the user's *advantage*, rather than their *disadvantage*.

It took decades before digital technologies tipped the scales with their cost and time savings – first in typesetting then in reproduction – so that their widespread usage took hold.

On the one hand, there were ever more sophisticated (and continuously improved) technological developments on offer, on the other, these offers were eagerly received as they improved a company's competitive edge.

The result is that today

■ TEXT is never complete, no matter how much authors and editors may have invested in it

■ GRAPHICS of all kinds are possible with wildly different levels of expressiveness, as well as animation

■ original, digital VIDEOS can be integrated in almost any environment including print, effectively sabotaging the attention economy

■ all these elements each have other meanings in their respective environments or call for interpretation in order to be relevant or adequately understood.

In other words, it's necessary to think about the COMPONENTS of content we previously viewed as a unit and to find appropriate forms – including product forms – for them.
In addition, demand is driven by dedicated considerations of a usage which insists on modeling every facet of meaning and context in order to make content 'findable'. On the other hand, content must be optimized for use in line with this demand as well as to support monetization.

So, the demand is there for offers and product forms which are so new and different that traditional business models threaten to collapse in the face of them. The necessary investment in monetizing the smallest units of content stands in contrast to the very small returns, which are generated by these means and which have to be accounted as simply and effectively as possible.

Digitization has unavoidable consequences, such as transparency in relationships and processes, questions of cause and effect, and questions of role and responsibility. And these consequences demand clear answers to these questions.

At company level, this leads to the question how the need for specific expertise can be met in short duration projects without jeopardizing their success. The question extends to the structure of the company itself, to the organization of roles, to participation in success, to responsibilities for the results of business processes etc.

The availability of and access to information is vital. Departmental thinking is counterproductive. Project teams bring expertise together, but at the same time are master of and accountable for the success of their process, their time and budget, and need and expect support. And there are many teams as required; their number only depends on the size of the company or the market in direct relation to the expertise provided by a company.

As soon as projects exceed the limits of the company's expertise, this raises the question of networks of projects, when your own expertise is indispensable but not sufficient to ensure the success of the project.

How many 'companies', 'freelancers' and 'networks' will have to be available and how will they be organized?

In his blog, Craig Mod introduced the term 'subcompact publishing'[i]. In the article he proposes that Subcompact Publishing tools and editorial ethos begin with the following qualities:

> "Small issues sizes (3-7 articles / issue), small file sizes, digital-aware subscription prices, fluid publishing schedule ... touching the open web."

This is a summary of a completely unconventional approach to the question of how we can get an idea of what a competitive approach to publishing could look like in the digital world.

Literally: a publication using the advantages of digital technologies.

Prerequisite 1: highest quality content
Prerequisite 2: lowest possible cost
Prerequisite 3: no technical impediments to use
Prerequisite 4: OPEN

Demonstrated with the example of MATTER[ii] and in the words of its creator:
> "MATTER isn't quite a website, … (it's) a new model for high-quality journalism, … a sustainable way of paying for the hard work required to produce the best reporting."

What he explains using the example of the development of the Honda N360 in 1967, and how, from this example, he draws wide-reaching conclusions for the publishing industry is as fascinating for lateral thinkers as it is off-putting for traditional publishers – and their concepts. For traditional publishers, literally unthinkable.

As he continues his line of thought by concerning himself with the design of the user interface, he doesn't go into more detail about the necessary, organizational basis for this type of publishing, about the NETWORKING[iii] of content creators and those who provide the content – in accordance with the requirements above – in an agile manner, based on HTML.

Nor does he concern himself in this context with the (semantic) STRUCTURING of content in order to actively support its 'findability' in the 'open web'.

A thinker who I hold in great regard, Brian O'Leary, summarizes this in a blog post as follows:

> "We tend to think of books and magazines as 'content objects', not solutions. The book business, in particular, laments the declines of traditional ways that people have discovered what they read. I think that answer to how we market content in the future will start to come when we stop thinking of content as objects."[iv]

In summary, all these elements have the result that

- networked cooperation between content creators and technology experts
- highest quality content
- lowest possible costs
- (quite) 'small' publications, small file sizes
- appropriately low prices in a subscription business model
- no technical impediments to use
- intuitively simple user interfaces for providing and using content

plus for the near future
- sufficiently deep structuring of content for meaningful usage contexts
- integrated processes for agile usage

can serve as the framework and benchmark for a future business model which is within reach when you do as Craig Mod suggests:

Throw all the expertise and content you have on a big table. Take up a position as far away as possible so you can evaluate what you see. Make a brave decision:

Reduce the range of your offer to its core, simplify the path to usage, dispose of excess ballast. Use the resources which are freed up to patiently and single-mindedly increase your value to your customers in terms of quality and use.

For any additional information please contact Helmut von Berg, H.von_Berg@klopotek.de.

[i] http://www.craigmod.com/journals/subcompact_publishing
[ii] https://www.readmatter.com/
[iii] http://publishingperspectives.com/2013/01/why-publishing-of-the-future-is-networked-publishing/
[iv] http://www.magellanmediapartners.com/index.php/mmcp/article/content_as_objects/