

In Response to the Edge Annual Question 2010: How is the internet changing the way you think?

The internet is producing a fundamental alteration in the relationship between knowledge, content, place and space. If we consider the world as divided into 2 similarly populous halves: the ones born before 1980 and the ones born after 1980 – of course there are other important differences such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, geography, etc- yet I see the 1980 division as significant in the shift and alteration in the relationship of knowledge, place and space, due to the use of the internet.

Three examples/scenes:

Example/Scene 1:

I am responding to this question from Funes, a locality of 15,000 inhabitants in the core of the Argentine Pampas (country side). I am in what is called a "locutorio"; a place with 8 fully equipped computers that charges \$0.20 dollars (twenty cents) for 15 minutes of internet use. Five other users are here. A woman in her 20's talking via Skype (with headphones) with her sister and niece in Spain, a 30+ guy in a white shirt and tie scanning a resume, 2 teens playing a video with what I guess is a multi-placed or non-placed community, a guy on a facebook page posting photos of a baby and a trip and I, a 42 year old architect on vacation with an assignment due in 2 hours! I am the older one here. I am the non local here. Yet the computer helps me and corrects my spelling without asking anyone.

Example/Scene 2:

Years ago when I was an architectural student and wanted to know say, Guarino Guarini's importance as an architect, I would go two flights down the stairs at Avery Library, get a few cards, follow the numbered instructions on those index cards and find, 2 or 4 or 7 feet worth of books in a shelf dedicated to the subject...then I would look at a few cross referenced words in such cards, such as, "mannerist architecture", go along another path in the same room, and identify another few feet of books on the subject. I would leaf through all the found books and get a vague, yet physical sense of how much there was to know about the subject matter.

Now one Googles 'Guarino Guarini', and in 0.45 seconds, one gets 108,000 entries. The first page reveals specific details: he was born in January 7 1624 and lived until March 6, 1683, 6 images of cupolas, a Wikipedia, and encyclopedia Britannica entry. My Google search is both very detailed yet not at all physical. I can't tell how much I like this person's personality or work. I can't decide if I want to flip through more entries.

Example/Scene 3:

One is in a car going from New York to Philadelphia. You have GPS yet no maps. The GPS announces where to go and takes into account traffic and tolls. You trust the GPS, yet in your memory you wish to reconstruct a trip years ago with other friends. In that other trip you had a map, you entered the city from a bridge, the foreground was industrial and decrepit, the background was vertical and contemporary...at least that is what you remember...was it so? You zoom out the GPS to see if the GPS map reveals an alternative entry route, a different way the city geography can be approached. Nothing in the GPS map looks like the space you remember. What happened? Is our memory of the place faulty or is the focus of the GPS too narrow? Why do we feel permanently lost even when we are at the place where we wish to be?

The feeling I want to convey with these examples/scenes is how over time and with the advent of the internet our sense of orientation, space and place have changed - our sense of the details necessary to make decisions has changed. If decisions take into account the many ways in which information comes to us, then the internet at this point privileges what we can see and read over many other aspects of knowledge and sensation. How much something weighs, how does it feel, how stable it is. Are we, the ones that knew places before the internet, more able to navigate them now or less? Do we make better or worse decisions based on the content we take in? Do we have longer, better rests in far away places or constant place-less-ness? How have image, space, place and content been altered to give us a sense of here and now?

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