



Changing the Channel

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PARADIGM.

My iPod touch confuses me. It's not that I don't like it—I think it's great. I carry it with me everywhere. I do nearly everything with it I can do on the internet and a lot of things I used to do without a computer. Reading the web and email, checking sports scores and stock prices, getting the news, tweeting, looking at my friends' pictures, listening to music and the radio, mapping travel routes, reading books, answering ready reference-style and trivia questions ... you know the story. On top of that usual stuff, I also watch baseball games, check when the next bus is coming, and study languages, which make this cheap little device that fits easily in a pocket unusually well-suited to being a constant companion. And yet, it confuses me.

It's easy to understand that I'm listening to music when I'm listening to music. Same thing with browsing the web or reading email. But everything else creates a gray space that's new for me. Until I got this thing, I knew the difference between watching TV, listening to the radio, using the computer, reading a book, and doing homework. They were all different from each other, required different tools, occurred in different rooms. It's the story of the internet itself in microcosm—one by one, everything we were used to doing has been shifted around. But now it's all shifted into this little glowing entertainment rectangle that fits into my pocket.

The most confusing part of it is that I don't even think about it when I'm using the web

anymore. If I'm using an app on my iPod, maybe it's reaching out to the internet and to the web, but maybe it's not. Some apps cache a lot of data locally; some don't. The best apps make you forget about that and focus you on doing that one task at hand in a simple, elegant manner. Watching baseball, reviewing vocabulary flashcards, and looking for open houses in our neighborhood used to be activities I did in different places at different times. Then, I could do all of them on the web, all at the same time. Now, I can do them on the iPod, but only one at a time. And somehow I like that better. So much better, actually, that I'm often happy to fork over a few dollars for the right to do it. Two years ago, I never would have thought to pay a few dollars to use services like these on the web. Now, if it looks good enough, I don't even think twice. Streaming live baseball video so I can watch the Tigers wherever I am? Heck yeah, sign me up.

Here's the funny part—and I know I'm not alone in this—not only would I have never paid for this before on the web, I don't even have cable TV. If we just paid the \$60 or whatever most U.S. citizens pay per month for cable or satellite TV, I could watch any game right there on my big shiny TV. But I don't. Instead, I pay a lot less and watch a little tiny version of the same thing on this little screen. Similarly, we pay \$10 per month for DVDs by mail from Netflix, but we use Netflix over the web, watching lower-quality streams on a smaller screen more

than we watch the DVDs. I'm sure most of you have realized this same kind of thing recently. Maybe it's that you watch videos on YouTube more than on your TV, or maybe it's that you never play CDs, LPs, or tapes anymore because your music is all online. Maybe you use Epicurious instead of the 27 cookbooks on the shelf in your kitchen. Maybe some particular device caused you to realize these changes, as I did, or maybe it hasn't hit you yet—but it will.

Here's my confusion in a nutshell. I don't know where the web is anymore. I don't know what an app is. I don't know what a book is, and I don't know what a TV channel is. Or, well, maybe I'm overstating my ignorance—I guess I know what they are, but they aren't where they used to be. Or they changed shape or costs, or I started using and doing them differently. But I didn't expect that to happen, and looking back, it's some innocuous change like a suddenly big-enough desktop computer screen, a suddenly fast-enough internet connection, or a suddenly tiny-enough pocket device that caused the change in my behavior.

Seeing this happen to me and to people all around me, I think this has two sets of interesting implications that we'll see play out in our homes and in our libraries in the near future.

Apps for Your Television

Now that we're getting used to the idea that "there's an app for that" on our phones, guessing what the next shift is going to be is easy. I think it's going to move back to our televisions. The cable and satellite industries have resisted a la carte channel choices for decades. Instead of those companies finally caving, it will be Google and Apple that will sell you apps for your television—apps that bring you your favorite shows, sports teams, websites, and, while we're at it, things you wouldn't expect to see on televisions, such as, well, books. There are under-the-radar products that work sort of like this already, such as DVD

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players that let you stream your Netflix account to your TV and stand-alone boxes that let you watch baseball games and YouTube. These are the early movers in the market to confuse television watchers in the same way I'm confused about how the web got into my music player. But they haven't got the product right yet, not in a way that will be a big hit. Remember WebTV? Right idea, wrong time. I'm guessing it will be Google or Apple that gets it right first because they've both been dancing around television sets and video viewing for years, because they're both heavily invested in advertising sales, and because they both know how to take over a market with a simple-to-use innovative design.

Television used to be easy because we had local and network channels and favorite shows, and we knew where to go for both. The difference between a channel, a show, an app, and a website is about to get very small, and you're going to be able to see any of them on any glowing entertainment rectangle you choose.

Channels for Your Library

Bringing this back to our workplaces, what does another in a long series of confusing shifts of which media go where mean for libraries and the communities we serve? I can't say for sure, but I can envision one main trend, and from that, I can draw one main conclusion, which I hope might ring true for you.

I think it will become true—or maybe it already is true—that people using our libraries will expect more of us. Or more precisely, they'll expect to receive more of what we provide in more ways and in more places. It's already the case that people presume they should be able to do things they can do at our library through the web. And because they can do that, they presume they can use our libraries through their phones and their tablet computers. To some degree, we've succeeded in enabling some of that. Any service or content that works well on the

open web through using web standards and common conventions should render well in the web browser on a fancy new phone. And reading a book in the library will be much like reading the same book, checked out, in their home.

This has shifted to the web—kinda. I can “check out” an audiobook from the District of Columbia Public Library right now using OverDrive. All told, it's convenient and painless ... but it's not easy. It requires installation of a no-cost but proprietary application on my desktop. There's a free app for it on my iPod. But to connect the two, I have to change the iPod's settings in iTunes in a way I don't like. Suffice it to say that I can't do it with a few clicks from my TV. I'm glad D.C. Public is providing this service, and I'm happy to use it. It could be a lot better, though. This could be more seamless if I could pick out items straight from the iPod app, for one. There are limits on which titles are available that must have something to do with licensing, but anyone not tuned into the shifts in the content vendor marketplace won't know what those limits are; rather, they'll just be frustrated at the volume of items not available through the service. Finally, the whole thing would become incredibly popular if people could install “an app for that” into their televisions, browse the movies available from their library, and then choose and watch a flick right on their TVs. Why shouldn't the most popular channel on our TVs be our library's channel?

I can't think of a good reason why it shouldn't.

I can think of reasons why it won't, though. Seeing that limited content selection warns me that this still-developing marketplace will have a series of changing content licensing alliances. News broke this past August that Netflix signed a \$1 billion deal to add several studios' video content to its stable of streamable movies. Netflix has some market clout and a profit motive, both of which let it put together a deal like that. Do we have anything like that

market clout? We sure don't have the profit motive. Without the money on the table, I worry that we'll long be limited to dancing with the content also-rans that didn't get picked up in those big-money licensing deals in the commercial-content delivery marketplace.

It concerns me too that the tool on my desktop in the middle of this equation is proprietary software. There has to be a marketplace of development around these kinds of services for innovation to take hold and prove its worth. Apple's App Store might have inconsistent policies, but it's allowed thousands of developers to deploy their apps to millions of users. Where's the opportunity for an engaged library user to write his or her own app to tap into the content the library offers through private license agreements and proprietary software?

It's foolish for a tech writer to say a predicted change is inevitable, but I'm willing to be proven a fool here. How we watch video has changed into an open-to-software-developers marketplace for mixing up apps, channels, shows, and websites everywhere but on our TVs, and it feels inevitable that it'll happen soon. I might stay confused as it happens, but it seems clear that like with everything else librarians do to connect users with content and services, the more open and supportive of outside innovation we stay, the bigger the opportunity we allow ourselves to help our institutions transition yet again to each new user paradigm. ■

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